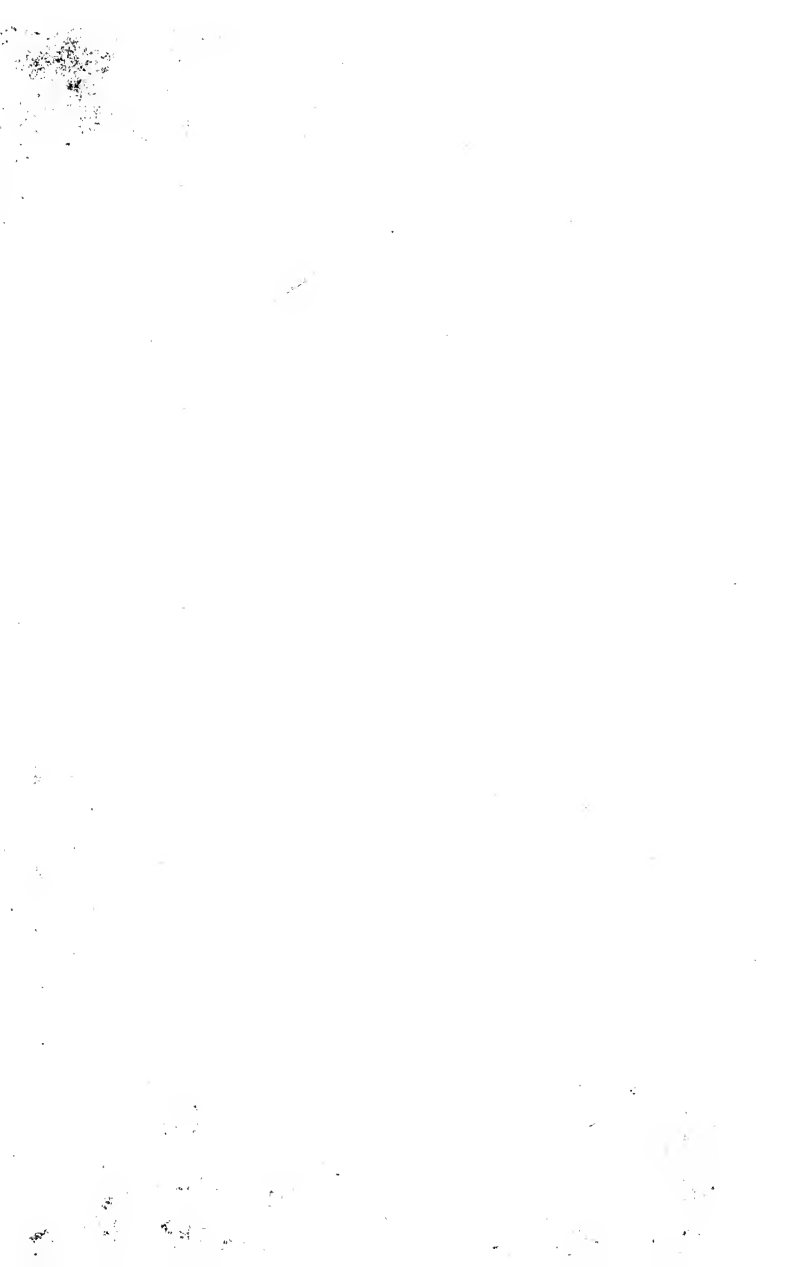
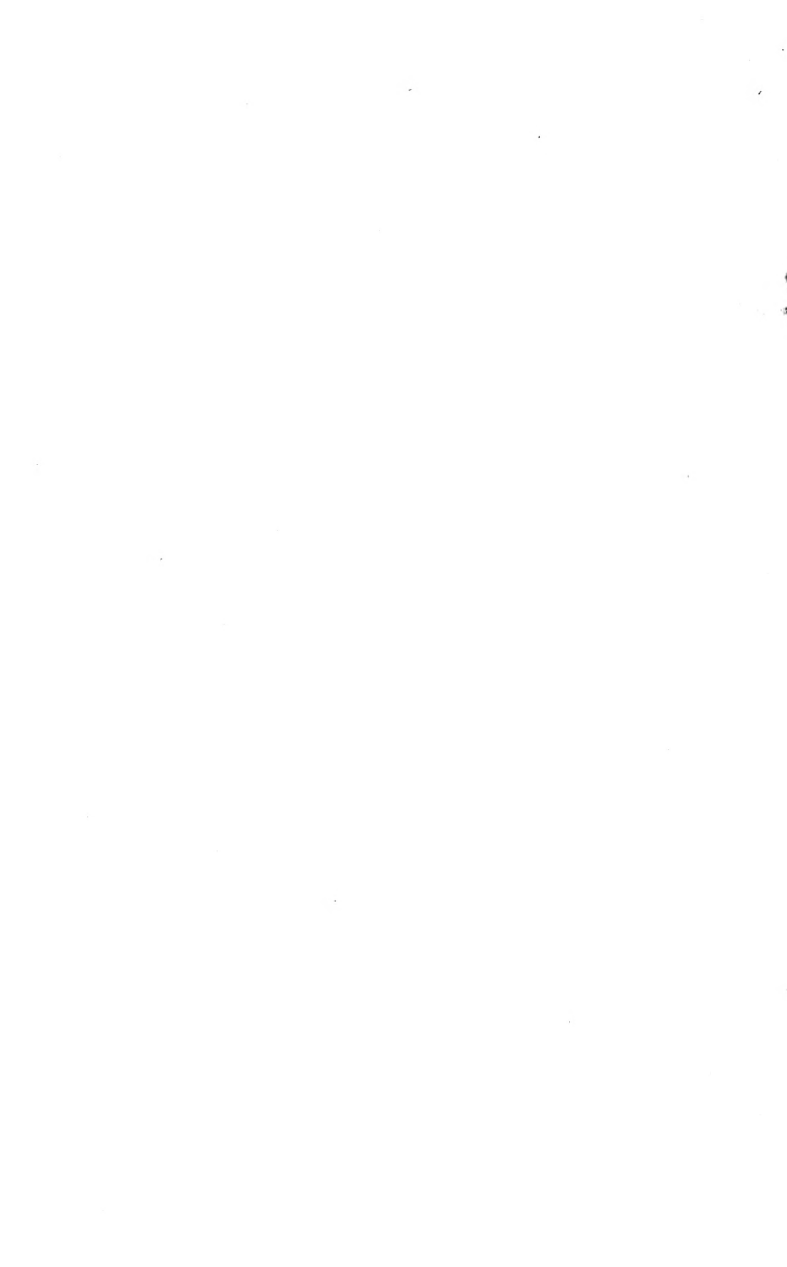


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FAIR AND FREE

VOL. I.

FAIR AND FREE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

‘A MODERN GREEK HEROINE’

*‘A maiden fair and free;
And for she was her father’s heir,
Full well she was y-cond the leir
Of mickle courtesy’*

DRAYTON

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON

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DEDICATED
TO
MISS THERESA THORNYCROFT

FAIR AND FREE.



CHAPTER I

THE clocks of Paris were striking ten in the morning of a day in the middle of September 1879 as two Englishmen entered together the *salle à manger* of the Grand Hôtel du Louvre.

The younger was a man between two and three and twenty, strongly rather than well proportioned, over six feet high, with light brown hair, and a frank, open face, almost boyish in its good humour and playfulness. A natural smile seemed to twinkle in the brightness of his well-opened light blue eyes, and to hover about his lips, whilst the manner in

which he bore himself showed in every movement an air of carelessness associated with the extremest good nature.

The appearance of his older companion was a remarkable contrast. This was a man about the middle height, in complexion inclining to be dark, of a quiet and yet commanding aspect. A little pale, a little lined, a little thin, and in the faintest degree frigid, his face, that of a man no longer in his prime, impressed by the pride of its slightly contracted eyelids, the decisive tightness of its narrow lips, and the aristocratic *ton* of its every feature. He walked slowly, his head erect, with an easy, dignified step, and a manner of superiority not every one understands how to assume. Faultless in itself, his attire was also one in no way misbecoming a tourist.

The two proceeded to one of the tables, and having ordered *café-au-lait* for three, continued their conversation.

‘And how did you happen to meet this

Mr. Laurier, Curteis?’ asked the elder of the two.

‘I came on him by chance, Mr. Keppel, as we yesterday fell in with you. We first met, three weeks ago, in an hotel at Heidelberg, discovered we were to travel in the same direction, and so, by choice, went by the same train, ratified our acquaintance in a smoking carriage, and have since wandered about together; and a pleasanter companion for a tour would be a man difficult to discover. I have been dawdling about with him when I ought to have returned to my father’s shooting party at Wyvenhome, and have been learning to like the man better every day. What do you think of him?’

‘He is somewhat the sort of man I should have expected to find him. You do not know who he is?’

It was said in a tone of his smooth speech that implied Keppel knew and believed Charley Curteis did not...

‘Who he is? Why; is he anybody remarkable? A prince incognito, champion trapezist, commander-in-chief of a society of Nihilist assassins, or something of that sort? I thought he was a barrister.’

‘So he is. Only, naturally, you don’t hear much of the legal world. Your new friend is a man who has recently drawn attention on himself by success of no common kind in several cases. Where an interest is taken in men expected to rise into notice, you will find Laurier’s name well enough known. I have been interested to meet him. There is a very good story going of how he proved a little too much for two ladies who thought they were going to come with flying colours out of certain awkward predicaments in the Divorce Court, thereby affording the onlookers, as you may suppose, no little amusement.’

‘I understand,’ said Charley Curteis. ‘I suppose, then, that is where Laurier has learned his elevated opinions of womenkind.’

Keppel's eyes watching the garçon pouring together his coffee and milk showed his concern in other things to be for the time of a merely secondary order, but he observed, 'Scarcely, I should think. Perhaps his opinions may have assisted to his successfulness on that particular occasion.'

'He is all right, is he not?' now asked Charley with a little uneasiness; 'because I have invited him to Wyvenhome for some shooting.'

'You should have ascertained that before you invited him,' suggested Keppel, with a smile. 'However, do not distress yourself. You may be quite easy about Laurier. He hates women; and if he has about him—as report says, and I think seems true—something of pitilessness, that is not a trait likely to inconvenience you.'

'Only report wrongs Laurier,' said Charley; 'he neither likes women nor believes in them, that is true. Or rather he is unable to like

them because he cannot believe in them. But so far from being pitiless, he is a man of a just, consequent sort of mind, and, I believe, if a woman ever did win his confidence—well——’

‘“He’d make her love his heaven and her divine,”’ quoted Keppel, splitting a roll and proceeding to butter it. ‘I have doubts of that, Curteis.’

‘Well, now, how many men do believe in women?’ began Charley; ‘Laurier despises them. Granted. Also, unlike a good many others, no less bitter against them, he keeps aloof from the petticoats. Some men I know would show more consistency of character if they did likewise——’

‘Very true, Curteis,’ put in Keppel in parenthesis, whilst Charley went on.

‘What he says is, as you say, hard. Well, he chooses his words aptly, and his voice gives them point. Other men’s words would cut equally keenly if they possessed Laurier’s skill to use them. But I assure you, Mr. Keppel,

Laurier's dislike to women is not a mere vulgar dislike, and seems to me much more easy to misrepresent than to understand. After all, it matters vastly little to me. He is a genial companion, with abundant wit, and a will to be agreeable even with an ass like myself, or with the sex which he does not like.'

'You are a lucky fellow, Curteis,' said Keppel, 'to be able to find more merit than demerit in every man you meet.'

'And woman,' added Charley; 'particularly if she be young and good looking.'

'No doubt. That is another thing. Apropos of Laurier. It seems he has been taking a very long holiday, and now he is going to Wyvenhome for some shooting. How is that, do you know?'

'He has been overworking himself,' explained Charley, 'and the medical men have insisted on a long holiday and a lazy one. But here he comes.'

Keppel looked up. A man had just entered

the room, and was coming towards them, in height some five feet eight, of an attractive and essentially intellectual presence. Handsome beyond dispute, with the handsomeness of almost perfect proportions of feature and lineament, he had one of those severe and powerful faces, whose contours strike a beholder with an impression of straight lines and rectilinear angles. To his rigidly handsome face, the un pitying lines of lips chiselled sharply, and resolutely closed, and the lustre of commanding eyes, in colour nearly black and shaded beneath strong brows, gave an air of resolve it was impossible not to admire, and perhaps prudent to distrust. His hair, like his eyes, bordered on black. A short black moustache covered his upper lip, a steel grey shade his shaven cheeks and chin. His figure was justly made, and he carried himself with a certain masculine grace. His dress, a light grey suit, was a little dandified for a tourist, but his manner was marked by an absence of affectation.

He took his place beside them, and, whilst helping himself to coffee, inquired—

‘Have you got your invitation to *déjeuner* with Mademoiselle Raouzelle, Mr. Keppel?’

‘I have. Will you come with Curteis and myself?’

Laurier declined.

‘You had better come, Mr. Laurier,’ urged Keppel; ‘Raouzelle is going to be the rage, and you will see a new aspect of life.’

‘New?’ asked Laurier, laughing; ‘in what way? That a woman should be an actress, or an actress disreputable, or a disreputable woman the rage?’

‘None of the three,’ replied Keppel, readily; ‘but that, as you will find, mademoiselle is, after all, *bonne fille*.’

‘Very possible. As good, at any rate, as the rest of the irreconcilable sex. Only, with many thanks for your invitation, Mr. Keppel, I shall not need to *déjeuner* with her to believe it.’

cessation. It is at the price of something left undone that everything is effected, of something unthought that every thought is thinkable, and, as soon as room is given it, the wild flow of life—and all life is in its nature wild—unbidden leaves the constraining channels into which need has coerced its actions and thoughts, and begins again its wide shallow wanderings abroad over everything. Strange moods creep over the mind, odd curiosities, and thoughts which seem to have no base. Consistency and purpose, those grim things that turn young blood into old, totter, the one disintegrates itself, and the other falls into abeyance. Some of youth's golden faith in unbounded possibilities returns, and a man's own opinions lose weight with him, or else remain gaunt survivals of a past around which all is changing to another phase of things.

That no man emerges from a holiday such as he entered on it is a flat truism. No man lies down such as he rose. But periods of

relaxation are the epochs of life's cataclysms, when long pent forces break up the habits that controlled them.

So it comes about that taking a holiday is a perilous adventure leading no man knows whither. At its end the holiday-maker is metamorphosed. Factors have entered into his life, with the management of which he has no acquaintance, and this is why, after a holiday, especially one succeeding an arduous spell of mental slavery, men do strange things.

Laurier found a distinction between the interest he now, and the last time he saw them, discovered in the sculptures. Then they engaged his attention chiefly as works of art and antiquity, now more as things of beauty and expressive of ideas. The exact difference he apprehended but vaguely, assured only of some advance in thought.

A great part of the sculptured female beauty he passed by unstudied. One bust of

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A great part of the sculptured female beauty he passed by unstudied. One bust of

Pallas, however, long held his attention. It was of no very peculiar merit, but the fine, fearless lines caught his eye, and surprised him into a comparison of the face's meaning, and the characteristics of its sex, as he understood them.

‘It is in deceiving themselves into believing themselves of worth, that women acquire the appearance of possessing it,’ he concluded as he walked on.

But to think misprision of women is to be thinking of women after all.

In time he reached the *salle* where, in solitary majesty, among her crimson curtains, the armless queen of Cnidos and Paphos accepts from votaries her beauty attracts from the ends of the earth an idolatry surely more sincerely flattering to her woman's heart than any little Melos ever had to give.

Laurier seated himself on one of the long settees, and, leaning back, regarded the Aphrodite.

Since he last saw her Felix Ravaisson had restored her to her ancient pose, thereby giving the goddess back a double measure of her dignity.

By imperceptible degrees she began to produce a profound impression upon Laurier. His eyes passed admiringly over her beauties and rose with something approaching awe to the divine countenance, whilst he found himself moved, involuntarily moved, as sculpture never had moved him.

A tornado of thoughts, amid a consciousness of a dominating calm—an effect, say, of the fresh buoyancy of unfatigued thought, brought into the presence of one of man's grandest creations.

But a sharp, short step approached, and an elderly French gentleman, who, as he entered, looked quickly at Laurier, took a seat at his side. The old man's features were pinched and meagre, leaving his age a problem for conjecture rather than calculation, but not

without softness, and a certain perfection, so to speak, of mellowed age. He watched Laurier awhile without speaking, then he remarked,

‘Is she not divine, monsieur?’

‘Divinely beautiful, monsieur, but—a woman.’

The speech of man had broken the spell of heaven.

‘I myself,’ continued Laurier, ‘do not believe in female divinities. This lady is “beautiful exceedingly,” much more so than I supposed when I last saw her. But she has a sharp nose, and a look divine perhaps, but a trifle domineering; and arrayed in flesh, I could conceive her proving prone to some of the least pleasant of her sex’s frailties. And, at least, if report is to be trusted——’

‘Ah, monsieur, hush! She is divine. You are young, monsieur, and you young men make bold with her because you do not yet know what she is. But you will not do that

with impunity. I am old. I have seen. I know. She is terrible, monsieur, the laughter-loving Cypris, and her vengeance is devastation.'

'That,' smiled Laurier, 'is perhaps how she came to be dethroned, monsieur. Divinities who conquer to destroy ultimately find themselves without worshippers. Victory should be empire, not destruction.'

'Ah, monsieur, you are very daring to say such things here. It is very imprudent.'

Laurier regarded the old man. His rapt, but evidently failing eyes, lifted to the goddess's immortal beauty, made it possible to doubt whether he was speaking figuratively, or actually assigned some divine vindictiveness to the marble Venus of Milo.

'Monsieur is a pagan?' asked Laurier.

'No, monsieur. I am Positivist—a little.' He lifted his shoulders and brows, to signify, perhaps, the indifference of his opinions. 'But I believe in her,' he continued with far differing

energy ; ‘ the other gods are dead, or most of them, but she, if she should die, all things would die to be her *cortége*. But she will never die, and never be dethroned. ’Tis she bestows the little spark of our kindling life ; she that decks its beauty ; she that crowns its love. She fills young hearts with sunshine, and gathers the children about the old men’s knees. Her all sentient things serve, and ever must serve, the immortal goddess ! giver of life, beauty, and love ! ’

His enthusiasm had taken him quite out of himself. He now turned up his quivering thin palms, and, in low, nervous tones, commenced the unrivalled invocation of Venus that opens the poem of Lucretius.

Laurier listened and admired.

As he went on, the old man’s fervour rose till it reached a climax in the crowning lines,

Omnibus incutiens blandum per pectora amorem,
Efficis ut cupide generatim sæcla propagent.

With a heavy sigh he dropped his trembling hands.

‘Thank you, monsieur,’ said Laurier, ‘your elocution is magnificent. But, after all, this creature’—with an indifferent wave of his hand he smilingly indicated the image—‘is a woman.’

‘Monsieur! monsieur!’ expostulated the old man, ‘monsieur, you are young. She has pity on the young. Be warned in time. Beware of her, fear her, worship her. Learn, before it is too late, to win her smiles; for her smiles are better than wisdom. If you will not she will strike you. She will not let you go. You cannot fly from her. She is amongst us; she is about us; she is of us; she is in us. You cannot blind her; you cannot turn her; prayers do not appease her. I tell you she will punish you, and she has an imagination, the cunning one! One cannot tell how she will take her revenge; but she will have it, and she strikes quickly, and she strikes home.’

He paused to observe what effect his words had on Laurier. The latter, intensely amused, was puzzling himself to decide in what sense the speaker himself understood them. Whilst he doubted the old man rose, rather brusquely, and said, in a quite different tone,

‘Good day, monsieur.’

‘Good day, monsieur,’ replied Laurier, hastily rising to return the unanticipated salute.

He watched the old man out of sight, and then turned into the *salle* of the Melpomene.

‘Do you chance to know,’ he there asked one of the officials, ‘an elderly gentleman, of courtly appearance, with longish hair, and a gold-headed cane, who, I imagine, frequents the *salle* of the Venus of Milo?’

‘He has been recommending monsieur to worship her?’

‘Precisely so. Who is he?’

‘I do not know, monsieur. He comes here to see her every day the Museum is open.’

Le vieux coquin!—the official laughed.—

‘They say he is in love with her.’

‘Is he mad?’

‘Not more than other men in love, monsieur,’ replied the Frenchman with imperturbable gravity.

Laurier smiled. He left the Louvre, and strolled across the quay to the light Pont des Arts, and leaned over the parapet. It was very hot, but the open air, the unimpeded light, the tramping of foot passengers, the busy quays, the traffic-laden stream, combined to make up a vivid impression of reality, a sense of coming back into life. ‘This, after all,’ he mused, ‘is what existence is—the endless, vulgar, toiling effort to do, do, do. And thus to labour is to be, and all the rest, to dream. Then, *Beati Laborantes!*’

What place in this living, heated, working world had the *vieux coquin*, in love with the Venus of Milo, with his misty myths dead more than a thousand years ago, his palsied

dance of the season, and the company, increased by the invitation of a number of visitors to Folkestone in addition to the ordinary *habitués* of the place, was larger than usual.

The entertainment was, too, of a correspondingly livelier, and more dashing description, with a recklessness of high spirits to match on the part at least of the more rapid portion of the assembly.

The large drawing-room, which was cleared for dancing, was eminently adapted to be the scene of an entertainment of the kind. Extending across the whole frontage of the house, with windows opening upon a continuous balcony that commanded a fine prospect of the sea, it was itself a lofty and handsomely proportioned room, of delicate colouring, whose marbles of rose, pale work of inlaid wood, silken curtains, and gleams of gold, combined with the hues of the walls to convey a whole in which art had concealed

itself in an impression of an artless, airy brightness, assuming an almost magical spell when flooded with artificial light.

About an hour after midnight the gaiety had reached its zenith. A general amalgamation had by this time taken place among the elements, at first a little shy of one another, of which the company was composed. The voluptuousness of the beautiful room had wrought its effect of luxurious charm, and the heyday of pleasure and play was going forward at a furious pace—with enrapturing dances, ravishing music, enjoyment *à toute outrance*, sparkling eyes, quick repartees, smiles, whispers, fascinations, adorations, condescensions, and rivalries.

At this time a somewhat tall brunette (how much of her stature she owed to the heels of her embroidered shoes it would be an impertinence to inquire) and her partner, a man below the average height, with light hair of an ugly shade, but otherwise of a passable

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personal appearance—a fact of which he was fully cognisant—slipped, with a laugh, out of the vortex of dancers waltzing to the ‘Valse des Roses,’ to take breath, where the tall red marble pedestal of a bust of Clytie made a nook of refuge.

The girl sank giddily back into the corner, with her shoulders against the pedestal and the wall. The man, still supporting her with his arm held lightly round her, of which assistance she had much need, amused himself by looking into her face with a mixture of entertainment and admiration.

The latter was excusable. In her way the girl was a very beautiful creature.

The first thing in her to strike a beholder was the supple, comely strength of a finely proportioned form, a phase of feminine beauty to which her tight, low dress, that followed the lines of her figure, and displayed the grace of her shoulders and bust, and the whole faultlessness of her arms, gave a striking force.

Her face was in no way inferior; a grand pensive face, more commanding perhaps than attractive, but with features firmly and finely designed, with a regular forehead over which her dusky brown hair came low in a heavy fringe, with glorious dark-grey eyes, whose limpid regard seemed a command to speak her sense and truth, with an imperious, passionate mouth, whose lines by some witchery blended pride with almost luxurious softness. Not particularly fair, though particularly delicate of colour, she had hair of remarkable fineness (it was cut short and massed itself with a slight natural curl), which seemed to indicate her as one of those women who might have been blondes and are not.

Unless her whole appearance belied her, a proud, luxurious nature, tempered of grave and gay, and strong, for good perchance, and perchance for ill, with a strength of her own of which her mien showed she was conscious.

Her dress became her admirably. An ivory

silk with square cut bodice, its skirt tastefully and elaborately draped, and richly trimmed with expensive Spanish lace. In her ears she wore opals set in gold of a solid design with palest corals, matched by a carcanet about her neck, and bracelets on her wrists. The ivory fan that hung by her knee was a work of art many people would have kept under glass.

For some half minute her head drooped a little restlessly, for she was seriously giddy, but she soon recovered herself, and with a quiet 'Thanks' to her partner signified she had no further need of his support. Then, as he withdrew his arm, looking some amused triumph at him, she said,

'Are you convinced, Mr. Devergail, that "a girl who knows German" can dance with as much zest as another?'

The voice was a clear contralto, soft and of striking pliancy.

'Oh, please forget that slip of my unfortunate tongue, Miss Cassilys,' replied her

partner ; ‘ if you will, I will be convinced of anything.’

‘ Even that “ a girl who knows German ” can enjoy a “ good tearing waltz.” ’

‘ You are too cruel, Miss Cassilys. Still you won’t ask me to believe you exactly *enjoyed* the end of that. It was a magnificent spin, and you can go the pace and keep it up, I know, like no other girl in the room, still you will confess this last was a *tour de force*, not a pleasure ! ’

‘ I confess nothing of the kind,’ replied the girl, commencing slowly and gracefully to fan herself ; ‘ on the contrary, that was one of the most delicious whirls I ever waltzed, and I enjoyed every turn of it to the very last. Had I not, I should sooner have asked to stop. You may be quite sure,’ she added with a little movement of her head, ‘ I don’t go on with anything after I find it becomes unpleasant.’

‘ Never ? ’

‘ Never, on any account.’ This with a marked emphasis.

‘’Pon my soul ! that is a very good idea,’ observed Devergail. ‘It seems to me you ought to have another rule, never to do anything that is not pleasant.’

She seemed to hesitate to reply, but after a moment, as she bent to smooth a portion of tumbled lace on her dress, she quietly let fall, ‘I never do.’

‘And if you discover anything is pleasant of course you go in for it?’

‘If I can.’

‘Explicit,’ thought Devergail. His eyes passed from her face to her feet and back, to rest some seconds on her features, as if mentally taking stock of her.

‘What a jolly life you must lead, Miss Cassilys,’ he said.

‘Jolly? If you please to call it “jolly.” Mine is a very happy life ; as I suppose that of many others is, or might be, if they chose to enjoy their own pleasures.’

‘You believe in pleasure?’

She had been looking about the room, and answering as if only casually conscious of his questioning. Now she faced him as she asked, with a more thoughtful tone,

‘ Yes. Do not you, Mr. Devergail ? ’

He gave a little laugh for reply, and asked, with a grimace, ‘ What is pleasure ? ’

‘ Pleasure ? ’ she replied, fixing on him the light of her grand eyes with a sort of energy, and speaking slowly, ‘ surely the most precious, best, divinest of things.’

And as she spoke the words, it was plain they carried real meaning for her.

‘ ‘Pon my soul ! ’ rejoined Devergail, and he added, with a smile, ‘ good and bad alike ? ’

‘ Pleasure is *good*,’ was the slightly reserved reply.

‘ Pleasure and good what you call interchangeable terms, eh ? ’

‘ *I* think so.’

‘ You do ! That is your view of life, Miss Cassilys ? By Jove, now ! ’

A change, and another of a different type succeeding it, quickly crossed the face of the girl.

‘Not, perhaps, as you understand it,’ she said pointedly. Then she added, ‘Shall we not dance again?’

She dropped her fan and replaced her hand on his shoulder, and they glided back into the stream of the waltz.

About the same time, on the opposite side of the room, Keppel had discovered the lady to see whom he had, as a matter of fact, come.

This was a woman approaching fifty, who, when young, might probably have had some charms of the ephemeral type, but whose hard-featured, sharply-furrowed face had, with advancing years, since assumed so pulled and stretched a look, as to convey to the beholder no other impression than that of a woman ever at war, and often unsuccessfully, with fatalities. She had, however, about her a certain air of station and command that supplied the grittiness

of her looks with an unattractive dignity, and it was, after all, possible to doubt whether she was merely a vixen to be avoided with prudent respect, or one on whose toughened nature reliance might be placed under circumstances where more attractive women would fail.

Keppel placed himself at her side on the settee whilst she was looking the opposite way, and, bending a little towards her, said,

‘Mrs. Curteis, I believe.’

Mrs. Curteis looked round. A smile, the softest of which she was capable, came into her face, as she recognised him, and offered her hand.

‘I thought I was never to see you again, Mr. Keppel,’ she observed; ‘how long is it since we met—four, five years?’

‘Quite that. I hope everything has gone on well at Wyvenhome.’

‘Everything goes on as when you were last with us. That is a long time ago. You have quite left off coming down for some shooting

in the autumn. I wrote last year, but as you never answered, I thought it would be useless to do so this year.'

Keppel offered some excuse.

'Will you come?' asked Mrs. Curteis, in a way that showed she wished it; 'come for a fortnight or three weeks, or, if you cannot spare so long a time, ten days. Choose your own time. Whenever it is we shall be very happy to see you.' She added, after a momentary pause, what she rightly conjectured would go far to persuade him, 'Mr. Rintearn is coming down to us this year.'

'So I heard. I met your son in Paris. Well, if you will hospitably find room for me I shall have much pleasure in coming down. When shall it be?'

'Will the end of the month, when Mr. Rintearn will be with us, suit you?'

'Excellently. *Apropos* of Rintearn, how is your niece, Miss Cassilys?'

'Oh, very well.'

Keppel looked down.

‘Very well! Then she has not turned out consumptive, nor contracted any other hopeful disorder?’

‘Not she! There is never anything the matter with that girl.’ From the tone it appeared the speaker regretted the fact she mentioned.

Keppel replied with a significant ‘Ah!’ only.

Mrs. Curteis understood him, for she returned, ‘That will come to me though, in the end, without that.’

‘She is not yet married, then, at any rate?’

To have heard him ask it few people would have suspected he already knew it.

‘Married! No, indeed! Marcella Cassilys married! Ah, but I forget it is long since you saw her.’

‘And has anything very important in the meantime taken place?’

‘You can judge for yourself. She is here, somewhere.’

‘See if you can see her, and point her out to me.’

Mrs. Curteis looked about the room. Presently she said, ‘There, nearly opposite us, leaning against that pedestal with a bust upon it. A tall girl in ivory silk.’

‘I see. *Un peu décolletée.*’

‘Oh, yes. It would not be Marcella otherwise. “*Un peu*” you call it.’

‘H’m. She has very beautiful arms. Who is that man with her?’

‘Oh, don’t ask me. Some *roué* whom she has picked up somewhere out of doors. I don’t know anything about her friends, and do not wish to know anything.’

‘You let her dance with whom she chooses?’

‘Let her! Oh, yes. I let her do as she likes. I may as well do so with a good grace, seeing I cannot help it.’

‘What does her mother say?’

‘You surely remember her mother’s way, *laisser aller*.’

Keppel changed the subject and asked, ‘Are either of your daughters here?’

‘You don’t really imagine, Mr. Keppel, that I should bring my daughters to this house?—I see of what you are thinking, that I have brought my niece. But that is quite another thing. In the first place I possess no authority over her. I am merely a sort of appendage to save appearances.’ (Mrs. Curteis made a grimace to express that she considered appearances indifferently saved.) ‘Then she already has the name of one of the fastest girls in the place, and so has not much reputation to lose. Though I don’t wish you should misunderstand me; I believe the girl has hitherto drawn a line somewhere.’

‘Has she been here long?’

‘Three weeks; not wasted though, as she understands the use of time, I assure you.’

Keppel thought. He came to the conclusion that either Miss Cassilys had been doing things more than ordinarily outrageous, or her aunt lied in asserting three weeks had sufficed to earn the reputation of the fastest girl at Folkestone.

‘I should like to renew my acquaintance with this young lady,’ he said.

‘By all means. You will find her charmingly ingenuous, but——’

Meantime the last notes of the waltz had died away, and Devergail, in offering Marcella Cassilys his arm, suggested a turn on the landing. Amidst a crowd of couples they passed out of the room, and threaded their way up and down amongst the throng outside.

At one extremity of the landing was a bijou boudoir, a voluptuous little place of soft sofas, and silk, and fantastic shaped mirrors, which a single bright ruby lamp imperfectly lighted. Through the open door a group of men and girls, just within it, could be seen from the

landing. These were somewhat noisily talking together.

On the outside of this group stood a tall, slight girl, showily dressed in pale rose, of whom it was difficult to determine whether she was pretty or not. She had fine black hair, a tolerable face, and an undeniably splendid pair of the softest, long black eyes, but her *dégagé* mien, though sprightly, looked artificial, and the saucy smile on her lips was rather a blemish than a thing to grace their mould. That she was laced to suffocation, coloured with carmine on her lips, painted on her cheeks, eyebrows, eyelashes, and even inside the lids of her eyes, was only too apparent.

‘There is Theo Stryne,’ said Marcella, catching sight of her; ‘I have been wishing all the evening to see her. Let us go and speak to her.’

The two approached the group. It consisted, besides Theo, of some other girls and an equal number of men, betwixt whom a

risqué conversation was being tossed backwards and forwards, the girls holding their own with a facility of repartee, and a dexterity of fence to turn the *double-entendres* they should have been ashamed to allow, that was truly remarkable.

Theo at once turned to speak to Marcella.

‘Is not this quite too awfully delightful, darling?’ she began. Her tone changed as, glancing at the others to make sure they did not observe, she indicated the low bosom of Marcella’s dress, and looked mischievously into her eyes, saying, ‘I say, Marcella!’

Miss Cassilys coloured. ‘Does it look very low, Theo?’ she inquired.

‘Hush. The others will hear us. Only for goodness’ sake don’t let mamma see you, or I do not know in what costume she will next make me appear.’

‘Miss Cassilys,’ asked the voice of one of the girls seated in the midst of the group, ‘is this which Mr. Devergail is telling us true :

that you believe if a girl finds anything awfully delicious, that gives her a perfect right to do it, be it what it may?’

Marcella turned to reply. Before she had time to do so, Theo interrupted her with,

‘Oh, I say, Marcella, fie!’

‘But did you really say this, Miss Cassilys?’ repeated the first speaker.

All eyes were turned on Marcella.

‘You did, did you not, Miss Cassilys?’ insisted Devergail.

‘I quite agree with Miss Cassilys,’ added, with a laugh, one of the men, who was not known to her.

Marcella stood motionless. Only her quick eyes moved from one to another; for to speak they gave her no opportunity. The full of the red light fell on her shoulders and face and arms. Over her bosom she had opened her fan. As they pressed her her head bent a little, and her lower lip drew under the upper, as that of an unwitting child taken by surprise, or of one

sharply annoyed, but wishful to conceal annoyance. Within, her heart beat hard, with the angry sense, so well known to women and children, of wrong done them with no power in their hands to avert it, with the rankling felt by every noble mind to see its truth travestied, with the indignant rebellion of her whole nature at the indignity of the thoughts accredited to it.

It was difficult to be silent, with the blushes that scalded her, mounting her cheeks, but her lips trembled only, and did not part.

‘I wish I could bring myself to that pleasant creed,’ remarked another of the girls.

‘*I wish we all could,*’ rejoined the unknown man.

‘It is deucedly lucky that some of us can’t,’ concluded a plain, red-haired girl, who, in a bizarre toilet, probably intended to counterbalance her own want of every personal

charm, was lolling in a corner of the settee.

There was a general laugh.

The point was passed at which Marcella had been tempted to say anything. During this laugh she requested Devergail to reconduct her to her chaperon.

‘Who is this Miss Cassilys?’ asked one of the men.

‘She—’s—a—fool,’ drawled out the red-haired lady, with an extensive prolongation of each word. ‘She thinks herself “chic,” I’m told, and quite too awfully fast, you know; and to hear her talk! my goodness! But when it comes to the scratch—it seems she shows funk.’

‘Now you can all of you say what you like,’ put in Theo Stryne’s hard, fearless voice, ‘and I’ll stand up for Marcella Cassilys against all of you together. How happened it that you, Nellie, did not last week get into trouble about that milliner’s bill?’

The girl she addressed was silent.

‘Very well,’ proceeded Theo, ‘then don’t you run down Marcella. I know her better than anyone else here does, and I sometimes wish I were a little more like her.’

‘No, no, Miss Stryne,’ broke in accents of disapproval from the men.

‘Oh, I know what all that signifies,’ retorted Theo, with *aplomb* and a little laugh. ‘Come, Mr. Grey, take me back to my dear mamma.’

Miss Cassilys had been restored to the guardianship of her aunt, and Keppel had had a quadrille promised him, and was gone, and Marcella turned now to say something to Mrs. Curteis, not, to judge by the expression of her face, altogether pleasant. But her aunt anticipated her with a question—

‘Have you seen Charley anywhere?’

‘Not for some time.’

‘I wonder where he is?’

Marcella believed she could conjecture, and

in that was right, but she preferred to speak of what was uppermost in her own mind.

But again she was prevented, for her partner for the next dance at this moment approached, and Marcella, rising, left Mrs. Curteis alone to her unquiet surmises concerning what had become of her son.

CHAPTER III.

CHARLEY was gambling.

This was what Marcella had suspected, and Mrs. Curteis secretly feared.

The play this evening was of a character to rival the rest of the entertainment. Points were high in the card-room, but the most flagrant gaming was not there, but in a little room opening from that which served for the buffet. Here, until the mistress of the house dexterously dislodged them, a few habitual gamblers were encouraging play of the most reckless description.

Of course the fact was known.

‘What is going on in that room with a screen across the doorway?’ asked Theo Stryne of her partner at the end of the next gallop, as

she perceived several men and some couples, who had been to look on, issue with significant looks from the apartment in question.

‘Oh, nothing,’ replied the man.

But Theo was quick to recognise when a man told her an untruth, and, disbelieving him, commenced an attack of questions and cajolery which soon ended in a surrender on the man’s part and an agreement, under protest, to take her to see.

They entered the little room.

The party of players was small. Of them nearly half were Frenchmen. Some dozen people or less, who turned to regard Theo and her partner as they entered, stood looking on, and, in whispers, commenting upon the events at one or other of the two tables.

‘What are they playing here?’ asked Theo.

‘Baccarat.’

‘Let us go nearer.’

She approached the table. Charley, whom she did not know, sat just before where she

stood, and she availed herself of the somewhat tall back of his chair on which to lean, the better to view the play.

Charley had at first refused to play. Gambling was not among his habits, and presented for him no attractions. He had no need to win; no one wishes to lose; and he had the distaste of a wholesome nature for excessive excitement. 'I never do play, and do not care to play,' had been his answer when first invited to the tables. 'The more reason, my dear fellow, why you should have no hesitation in once trying your fortune,' was the reply. 'Do as you like, Curteis,' said another, 'only we wish you would come and help us simply to set some play going.' Good-natured Charley, who would have laughed in any man's face who attempted to force his consent with taunt or sarcasm, on the spot gave in. Once at the table he lost heavily, laughed at his fortune, showed himself not the man to strike his colours, recovered his losses, and stayed at

the table for nothing save to give other men their just chance of revenge.

Fickle fortune again turned her wheel. Charley's winnings melted to zero. Here he might with honour have stopped. Instead he went on. The intoxication of play is quicker than that of wine to confuse the reason even of the most dispassionate, and to induce an exaggerated influence of the most transitory of imaginations that is for the time irresistible. Charley became again formidably implicated. Then he suddenly changed his system of play, hitherto an easy one, for the feverish calculations of a man to whom to win has become essential.

One of his friends perceived it and promptly warned him to desist.

'You are in the wrong vein now, Curteis,' he urged. 'If you had played before you would know it. Leave. You will only lose money.'

Charley disbelieved, continued his careful

play, blundered, and lost like a man without sense. Finally the hopelessness of continuance began to make itself apparent even to his playdazed mind.

It was at this point that Theo came to the back of his chair. As she stood there he lost another deal. He leaned back to demur of one more venture. He had so many times assured himself this should be the last. Theo caught a glimpse of his face, pale, uncertain, pulled with dejection and anxiety.

‘Who is this that is losing so dreadfully?’ she inquired in a whisper, leaning back towards a lady behind her.

‘A Mr. Curteis.’

‘And who is he?’

‘Heir, it is said, to a large estate, if anything can be large half of which lies on that table.’

Charley had determined on another venture. The cards were dealt. Charley’s two made up seven points. At baccarat the game is nine or

the number nearest it. Charley's state of confusion may be conjectured from his asking for another card. He received a ten, and again lost.

An instant's hesitation, and he leaned towards his neighbour, and Theo overheard a part of a request for a loan, and a refusal, not unkind, but accompanied by an assurance of the uselessness of perseverance. Charley made a movement to push back his chair and rise from the table.

But at this moment a lady's white gloved hand laid on the edge of the table at his side some money folded in a note; whilst at the same time her voice urged in a whisper, 'Go on.'

Charley quickly turned to see who was his new banker. Theo's eyes met his.

'Try once more,' she said encouragingly.

Charley pushed the note and its contents on the table.

'How much?' asked the banker.

Again Charley looked behind him. Theo held up seven of her slight fingers. 'Seven,' said Charley, and the deal was made.

Theo watched with anxiety. Charley received a court card and the nine of clubs.

The next minute he turned to repay the seven pounds. Theo was gone.

But she had saved him. In highly strung nervous states the effect of a sharp shock is to make the mind break with its past, and take, with changed impressions, a new point of departure. In this case, that the event was happy as well as the incident in no mean degree contributed to the result. At the end of twenty-five minutes Charley rose disembarassed and the winner of a trifling sum, with which, considering the spirit he had displayed, he could honourably leave the table.

He went in search of Theo.

From another man he learned her name after a description of her dress and appearance.

Herself he long sought in vain. But at last she was found.

It was in the boudoir. In a shaded corner, on one of the settees, she was engaged in an intimate *tête-à-tête* with a man whose arm was placed along the back of the settee behind her. Anyone but Charley would have left them. He only gave them time to hear his step, and, walking straight up to Theo, offered his hand.

‘I think, Miss Stryne, you and I need no introduction,’ he said. She had at once put her hand into his, and he held it long and fast, looking his gratitude into her eyes raised to his, and then let it go, with a hearty ‘Thanks.’

Theo moved her dress and made room for him at her side.

‘Is it all right?’ she asked as he sat down.

‘All right, and all your doing, Miss Stryne.’

The other man rose, excusing himself, and left them.

‘Now, first,’ said Charley, taking out some

money, 'I must be just. But I am half ashamed to speak of money to you. Here are your seven pounds, with all my thanks, and more than my thanks. Half my winnings are by right yours, but I do not know how to offer them to you.'

'You must keep them, please.'

'And now, Miss Stryne, how am I to thank you? I was in such a deuce of a mess when you came from heaven, or wherever it was you came from.'

'I had been having an ice at the buffet,' replied Theo.

She met for an instant with her soft, dark eyes the regard of his amused, frank face; then her lids drooped, and taking her handkerchief from her lap, she commenced plucking at its lace edges whilst she asked,

'I wonder what you thought of what I did?'

'I thought you one of the noblest girls on earth,' replied Charley promptly, with all the

brightness of his fine, manly voice, 'to come to a man's aid as you did, regardless of what fools might say.'

'You make me ashamed,' she returned in a remorseful voice. 'I will tell you something,' she continued in a harder tone; 'I was told you were heir to a great estate, and lent you that money because I believed it true.'

There was a little silence.

'Now you know,' said Theo, offering her hand. 'I am nothing such as you suppose, you see, and you will not come to thank me again. Good-night; good-bye. And remember, sir,' she broke into a little laugh, 'I have not the honour of your acquaintance. But will you not shake hands?'

Charley had made no movement to take the hand she proffered, but only regarded her in silence. There was no doubt what she had said was true; and it was an ugly, lowering confession, hideous in the mouth of a girl. Still she had had the honour to make it, and,

in spite of it, his mind still judged well of her. Presently he said,

‘I am no heir to any estate, but only a younger son.’

‘I know. I soon found out my—mistake.’

It was said in the tone of a sneer at herself.

‘From whom?’

‘My mother.’

‘Then you were scolded for me too, eh?’

‘Yes,’ indifferently.

‘Again, thanks. And now, pray, were you very sorry when you found I was only a younger son?’

No reply.

‘Well, Miss Stryne, at least you will not insist that I shall not have the honour of your acquaintance,’ pressed Charley.

To insist on that had evidently assumed a different aspect now.

‘No,’ said Theo, ‘but you must get introduced to mamma, and then let her introduce

you to me. Come and ask me for a dance (I have none to give you) in a quite formal way, to make mamma see all that little affair is, by your own wish, to be entirely ignored.'

'Oh, no, it is not,' objected Charley, in a way that brought a smile no less of pleasure than amusement to Theo's face.

'Never mind; you comprehend,' she said, 'and till then we do not know each other.'

This was an understanding. More no man but a fool desires from a woman; and Charley rose and went away contented.

Marcella danced with Keppel the last quadrille before she left.

The result for Keppel was a little surprise, and an impression largely differing from the characteristics he had been by her aunt led to anticipate. Of the *ingénue* she showed nothing, rather she seemed to him—and, as it shall appear, he was no mean judge of his kind—a girl, for her age, creditably versed in all a girl should know of the atmosphere in which

it befell her to live. There remained, in truth, to be interpreted Mrs. Curteis's 'but' followed by an aposiopesis, which could be taken to signify that for an *ingénue* the girl was very unlike one. But Keppel's knowledge of the world inclined him rather, in view of the facts, to construe Mrs. Curteis's figure of speech in accordance with its most vulgar use, that is, as a substitute for a falsehood the speaker lacked either courage to tell, or wit to frame.

‘A handsome, well-bred young girl, with a pretty knack of unconsciously dropping neat sentences.’

Such was Keppel's verdict. And he concluded a careful education and congenial wit.

Still Miss Cassilys might be fast. There are no characteristics in women with which that one has not been found compatible. On this point, then, when the quadrille was ended, Keppel was still unsatisfied.

‘I should much enjoy a look at the sea,’

said Marcella, as the set broke up ; ‘ shall we go on the balcony ? ’

They passed out through one of the windows. The air was soft and mild, and, crossing the balcony, they leaned over the stone balustrade.

The night was cloudless, and the air still. Save the low talk of other couples on the balcony, no sound was audible except the plashing of waves on the stones of the beach. The moon approaching her first quarter was drawing near the meridian, and, though a faint shining on the eastern horizon showed that the dawn had already begun to break, there was no light sufficient to dim the brilliancy of the silver streak of moonlight tossed on the moving sea, and riding in, in splashes of brightness, on the back of each wave that broke.

‘ Artemis’s silver arrows,’ said Keppel.

‘ Ah, you think of those things,’ rejoined Marcella quickly, ‘ I am so glad ! I do too, and everything seems to me to wear so much

more meaning when a story or a myth is added to lend it life. But I am now and then very much laughed at for saying so.'

'Who educated you, Miss Cassilys?' asked Keppel abruptly.

'My father—till I lost him.'

There were mixed pride and pathos in her tone.

'And he taught you to like mythology?'

'To like the world, and everything that gives it meaning.'

A little silence, whilst without speaking they scanned the moonlit sea. Then Keppel,

'Why do you think, Miss Cassilys, Phoibos had so many loves and his sister only one?'

'Endymion. I never tried to think that out. Why was it?'

'Her light kisses everything as much as his, but—do you not perceive the difference?'

'Not yet,' replied the girl, the bright interest of her eyes fixed on his face.

‘She kisses in the dark, and, you know,
“peccato celato è mezzo perdonato.”’

‘Oh, I altogether dislike that interpretation, Mr. Keppel. It is as bad as your proverb, and that is meanness itself, a disgrace to the nation that coined it. It is frank acknowledgment that merits pardon with the generous.’

‘People should not be too generous.’

‘Yes, I have often heard that. Yet I do not know how we can be too generous.’

‘Handsome women can—perhaps of themselves, for instance,’ rejoined Keppel, and his eyes significantly moved in her sight from her face to her low dress.

Something, her last reply, or its tone, or her general freedom of manner, or a resultant of these and of other impressions indefinite if taken one by one, had made Keppel expect for answer a light laugh.

He was mistaken. One instant a quick sarcasm trembled on the girl’s lips, then, mindful of a counsel of her father’s, which had

since become a part of such wisdom as she had, that to be discourteous is always easy, she replied, as though his impertinence had escaped her attention,

‘I do not think mere giving away is what we should mean by generosity.’

‘A sensible girl,’ thought Keppel, ‘and her aunt a liar as she always was.’

Marcella had stepped away from the balustrade, and he took her back to her aunt.

Driving home in his cab Keppel summed up.

‘A clever woman is Mrs. Curteis, but she is fighting against long odds. Still she may carry it through. Dirty the girl’s reputation—that stands in the way of her marriage—and, if only she does not marry, the money goes to her aunt.

‘The means are just sufficient for the end : that speaks judgment. An intangible cause and a sharp effect : Mrs. Curteis knows her world. A “*je ne sais quoi*” for a weapon :

excellently chosen, there is nothing more difficult to defeat.

‘Will she carry it through?’

‘She has the girl against her, and the girl is strong.’

‘But she is in a bad set, and people begin to talk. When that reaches Miss Marcella’s ears how will she stand it? What has she to stay her? If not something out of the common, that is just the girl to collapse with a crash. That is what her aunt has seen.’

‘Miss Cassilys ruined. Then Mrs. Curteis’s game is won?’

‘H’m. No. There is still the money. Miss Cassilys is not unlikely to go to the devil, but her money will still buy her a husband. And then where are aunty’s schemes?’

‘It is clever, deucedly clever, and simple—and characteristic too! But there is money against it, and it won’t do.’

‘However, which is the principal point, I am in a position to answer my friend Lady

Julia Rintearn's questions concerning what sort of person Miss Cassilys is.

‘I wonder, by the way, to what length Mrs. Curteis is prepared to go—or would go, if—. That is a fine girl.’

CHAPTER IV.

‘I go back to London to-morrow, in time for dinner.’

The speaker was Marcella, in a very emphatic mood : the occasion, the moment of her return from the ball, that is about half-past four : the place, the large-sized drawing-room, of a good deal of pretension, but in fact shabby, and to the eyes raw, which formed the central room of Mrs. Curteis’s apartments at Folkestone.

‘To-morrow!’ expostulated Mrs. Curteis.

‘Yes, to-morrow,’ replied her niece with heightened emphasis.

‘Is there a man in this?’ inquired the aunt in a tone of amusement.

‘No there is not,’ rejoined the girl sharply.

‘I am going because, Aunt Edith, it is not a matter of indifference to me what becomes of my character.’

She pushed a chair to the side of the central table, and sitting down rested her elbow on the table, and her head on her hand.

‘Your character! I am sorry to hear that, Marcella. When girls become anxious about their characters it looks ominously as if they were in peril of losing them, my love.’

The girl closed her fingers on her thick brown hair.

‘I wish I had never come here, and never gone to this ball,’ she said.

‘Why?’ asked her aunt as if quite unable to understand her.

‘Why!’ exclaimed the girl, ‘when you yourself acknowledge my reputation is open to attack—have you any conception what that means for me, my reputation open to attack!’ She proceeded in a more collected tone but extremely firmly, ‘I have been making

a wretched mistake, and the knowledge of it begins to be forced upon me in a very unpleasant way. A little further and I shall have compromised myself. My dress, in the first place,' she threw her ermine-lined cloak from her shoulders and pointed to her bosom, 'that you compelled—yes, *compelled*—me to wear to-night is scarcely fit for a girl with any self-respect to be seen in. At this ball it has somehow happened that I have danced with the most dissipated men in the room, with men such as I have never before met, men of a strange conversation, and of a manner of waltzing that is a simple course of insults. How came I to dance with such men? How came they to be introduced to me, for till to-night I did not know them? I have been spoken of (other girls have told me of it) in terms for any girl very dishonouring, and I have had to acknowledge to myself that appearances half excused the treatment I have met. I have not known till to-night what it is

to be horribly ashamed, and what I have at this wretched ball learned about it I should be sorry to have to express in words. Now I cannot think all this has happened entirely by accident. I say nothing about the cause: I intend to break with the circumstances.'

'I cannot really,' returned Mrs. Curteis impatiently, 'discuss all this to-night, Marcella. I am much too tired, and must go to bed; and so must you.'

She added inwardly, 'I have been showing my hand.'

'There is nothing to discuss,' replied the girl with indifference; 'I have said what I wished to say, and to-morrow I am going back to mamma.'

Her disengaged hand fell down by her side, and she heaved a heavy, fretted sigh.

'You don't blame me, my dear?' asked her aunt approaching.

'Yes, if you ask me, I do blame you, Aunt Edith, very much. It was you who persuaded

me, in spite of my own judgment, to go in this shameful dress. I know I ought not to have heeded you, and I have been well punished for my mistake, but it was you who would have it so. Then, you were my chaperone, and you encouraged my dancing with those men; you should have known them better before you did so.'

Thought Mrs. Curteis, 'That "encouraged" is an awkward word. I wonder what she suspects?'

They formed a strange group: the vexed, proud, handsome girl, in her too low ball-dress, seated, in luxurious pose, amongst her ermine furs fallen down from her beautiful shoulders; and the hard-faced, crafty, middle-aged woman, muffled in cloak and tippet, anxiously striving to read in the other's young face what chance there was she would make a false step.

After a time she said, 'Why, girl, where is your spirit? I thought you were going to cut them all out with a nerve and a dash, to be the

girl *folle à ravir*, the fastest filly in Folkestone ; and now, just as every one is beginning to talk of you, the men to ask for your photos, and the women to call you bad names, because they no longer have much hope of rivalling your successes, you turn chicken-hearted and toss up the sponge, and begin to scold poor aunty because men, who won't take the trouble to dance a step with any other girl, come to a ball for a waltz with you. Have the pluck to go on, Marcella, and you shall have a frolic not one girl in ten thousand can dare dream of, aye, and make a splash in the world too.'

'In going under water. No, thank you.'

She moved and began to draw off her gloves.

'Oh, if you are going to become theatrical, Marcella, I've done. The fact is, you little coward, you are afraid of the men. Eh?'

'The fact is I wish to enjoy my life, not to see it shivered to pieces,' replied the girl with composure.

She rose and began to gather up her cloak.

‘It seems to me you lack the courage to look enjoyment in the face,’ sneered her aunt.

‘I lack the courage to look disgrace in the face,’ replied the girl, still bending over her cloak, without looking up.

‘If you choose to go on, Marcella, you will have admirers around you that many women will envy you.’

‘Thanks,’ answered Marcella at once coldly and with pride, ‘I have never yet lacked as much admiration as I have desired, and without disgracing myself.’

‘And suppose it should be said you decamped because you dared not show your face here any longer? That, I suppose, would not appear to you disgraceful?’

Marcella had taken up the folded cloak, and, with it thrown across her arm, turned to face her aunt.

‘What an absurd notion,’ she said with an incredulous curl of her lips, ‘as if a girl could

not leave a watering-place without all the world talking of it. What can make you think of such a thing?'

It was, perhaps, the wish it might happen.

'You may as well stay here the few days more before we go to Wyvenhome,' urged Mrs. Curteis.

'No, I go to-morrow.'

'I cannot go with you.'

'I shall travel to town with Mrs. Stryne.'

She bade her aunt 'Good-night,' and left the room.

Mrs. Curteis was not too tired to sit awhile and think.

It seemed to her that she was a woman whom other people without provocation used ill.

And most principally this Marcella Casily, who, in the natural course of things, a reasonable being might have expected to die long ago; who had therefore no right to be in the world at all; and who had been a

perpetual pretext for injustices done to her aunt.

For, to commence, Mr. Cassilys, Mrs. Curteis's father, and Miss Cassilys's father's father, who had amassed a large fortune by brewing, made, in Marcella's favour, a flagrantly unjust will. He left her father his land, which was not much ; and he gave herself, his eldest grandchild (she probably appeared in the world two days before Mrs. Curteis's eldest son, for no other reason) a sum equal to Mrs. Curteis's marriage dowry. Of the rest of his property he made four equal portions, and bequeathed them respectively to his son, his daughter, his son's children, and his daughter's children.

This was unfair enough of itself. But then Mrs. Curteis had several children and Mr. Cassilys only one, and that made it far worse.

Next, Mr. Cassilys sold his scrap of land at an enormous price. That done he made a will, actually, though perhaps not intentionally, more infamous than his father's. For, saving some

few thousands bequeathed to his sister and her children, he left all to his daughter out and out if she married, if not, for her life, after which it went to Mrs. Curteis or her heirs, a handsome jointure for his widow, during her life, being charged upon it.

Had Marcella died this had been tolerable, not just, but still excusable. But Marcella lived, and that, really, was a wrong ; because Mrs. Curteis believed Marcella's father had made his will in the immediate prospect not of her living but of her dying. As a child she was delicate, and after her twelfth year her parents were for a time anxious about her life, at which date Mr. Cassilys's will was drawn up.

Marcella, however, survived, and attained womanhood in the enjoyment of faultless health and strength, without any accident intervening to rectify the injury of her existence.

In the interim her father died. His property was distributed in accordance with

the unfair will, and his widow, Mrs. Cassilys, engaged in a new succession of injustices. She saved money out of her allowance, and taught Marcella to save money out of what her trustees paid her, and that in all conceivable and inconceivable ways. For it never appeared that she or her daughter stinted themselves in anything. Further, all this saved money, she and her daughter (a well matched pair) cunningly invested for themselves, so that each had amassed a little property entirely at her own disposal—money that is to say *stolen* out of what Mr. Cassilys had left them.

To add irony to injury it had come to pass that the mother and daughter, investing their savings in accordance with the advice of their solicitor, had been fortunate in their investments.

What should a woman so unjustly used, so mocked by men and fates as Mrs. Curteis, attempt? Remedy for past wrongs there existed, of course, none. But one thing was

worth trying, to prevent Marcella from committing the crowning wrong, and by marriage wresting to herself her father's wealth intended by him to be bequeathed—to his own relations.

To do herself and her plundered children this imperfect and tardy justice was Mrs. Curteis's intention, if it should in any way prove possible.

One circumstance among so many adverse ones there was in her favour. Of all the indolent, careless, inattentive women that ever sauntered through life, not one was comparable to Marcella's mother, Mrs. Cassilys.

On review, it was to be confessed, strange as that might seem, this had not much hitherto assisted Mrs. Curteis to improve her position in the game, but that had not been for want of enterprise.

Still, though hitherto Marcella had not met with any fatal accident, not got into any fatal embarrassment, nor contracted any fatal disorder—in short, though providence had ex-

hibited its wonted reluctance to be assisted to do its duty, Mrs. Curteis might yet, with management, acquire her brother's property.

It must not be imagined that these thoughts filled Mrs. Curteis's mind now for the first time. None were more familiar. Only Marcella Cassilys's behaviour of this evening had given their drift new force.

CHAPTER V.

HANDSOME and wealthy, Marcella had, be it observed, a lot necessarily embarrassing, as every maiden has whose face and fortune are fair.

How not so, when to each degree of excellence corresponds an equal degree of additional difficulty in rightly acting the serious *rôle* of life? Those whose humbler parts are more easily played seldom perceive that, and regard the wealthy, the wise, the well born, the well made, merely as enjoying lots more enviable than their own; ignorant that every one of these is obliged to attempt that enterprise always so arduous, a life above the ordinary level, and, in case of ill success, to fall in a way that cannot be without a stinging ignominy.

And in no case is this truth less understood

than with regard to personal beauty ; that thing so good that only insensibleness could not desire it, so embarrassing to wear, that pettiness—than which nothing is more opposed to its dignity—appears all but inseparably, in some one or another connection, attached to it. The privileges of a handsome woman are unmis-takable. Who suspects her embarrassments? Who takes into consideration their unparalleled nature? Who sees that almost universal inexperience of situations similar with hers surrounds her? Who weighs the fact of the early and perforce inexperienced age at which she is called upon to encounter the problems of her own tremendous powers?

Other women envy her the passions it is hers without effort to inspire, and, with more justice, the great privilege of wide choice in the disposal of her hand. Do they ever ask themselves what their course would be in some of the circumstances, possible enough for her?

In many of these cases they would find the

noblest, highest natured of women can do only —what she can.

But, to proceed.

In a private sitting-room at the Pavilion Hotel, after a late and dainty breakfast the next morning Keppel stood, with his back to the fire, talking with a friend.

This was a strong, resolved looking man of an age evidently considerably less than Keppel's. Without any pretence to handsomeness, he had manly and strongly marked features of a type distinctively aristocratic ; whilst a high brow, somewhat pointed above, together with dark hazel eyes of more than common quickness and depth, under eyebrows that almost joined, suggested a man of a certain unflinching sort. He wore large wiry whiskers, and his moustache entirely concealed his mouth.

‘ I met last night an ancient flame of yours, Rintearn,’ said Keppel, between two puffs of a cigar.

‘ Where ? ’

‘ On the road to the devil.’

‘Indeed. Who then?’

‘One Miss Marcella Cassilys.’

‘Miss Cassilys is no ancient flame of mine, but the woman I intend to marry; and she is incapable of being on the road to the devil.’

He spoke with decision, and with a sensible dash of temper.

Keppel puffed at his cigar. Presently he remarked,

‘I am not going to marry Miss Cassilys. So it does not concern me. But I can tell you she is going a deuce of a pace here. I met her last night at the ——’s. You know the house, and when I tell you she danced with all the fastest men there, that a good many men who are particular shied her (at which I don’t wonder, seeing the girl was half naked), that she is talked of as a girl who intends to be one of the fastest in Folkestone, only waiting an opportunity to perpetrate something pyramidal, as the French say, you may judge for yourself of the future of Miss Marcella Cassilys.’

Rintearn had pushed back his chair from the table. With his legs stretched before him, and his arms folded, he sat silent and thoughtful. His right hand covered his mouth, his forehead grew heavy with frowns, and he appeared to be with difficulty taking in the meaning of Keppel's words. At last his hand fell and his annoyance found relief in a tremendous 'Damn.' Then he rose and went to gaze in a purposeless way from the window.

'Where is she staying?' he inquired, quickly turning his head, at the end of some minutes, 'where would one have a chance of seeing her?'

'I don't know. How should I?'

'I wish I did.'

'Why, are you intending to interfere?'

'Interfere! How the devil can I interfere?'

rejoined Rintearn savagely. 'I have no rights over the girl. She is not engaged to me;—

'Oho,' thought Keppel, 'now we have arrived at the truth of that'—'and in this cursed

state of society in which we live what can a man say to a woman who does not belong to him ?’

‘Some men aver you may say what you like to Miss Cassilys.’

‘Then they lie. I only wish some man would say it to me. He’d not forget it.’

‘I don’t suppose he would,’ rejoined Keppel, faintly smiling to himself as he surveyed his friend’s athletic limbs.

‘The *convenances* of society!’ growled the latter, throwing himself into the nearest chair, on which he sat cornerwise, with his arm on its back, ‘to look on politely whilst a woman, for whom you would give your soul to torment, yields herself to be seduced. Give me a trifle less civilisation, and the opportunity to tell her what she is about, and to knock out the brains of the first scamp who comes near her. I daresay that is savagery, only, if so, I prefer to be a savage.’

‘Yes, Rintearn, I think it is the state of

existence for which you were by nature intended,' observed Keppel meditatively, 'and were it not for that title you will have to inherit, I would seriously advise you to consider settling in Central Africa or Patagonia.'

'That confounded title!' rejoined Rintearn.

He got up from his chair with a jerk that threw it down, and strode across the room.

'Where are you going?' inquired Keppel.

'Out.'

Keppel was left alone. 'Now if he does not before luncheon find Miss Cassilys, I don't know Jack Rintearn,' he said to himself. 'In the interim I can write to the Lady Julia, who will be agreeably pleased to learn, in addition to Miss Cassilys's characteristics, that her son is not engaged to her.'

Rintearn obtained a directory, and ascertained Mrs. Curteis's address. He had no intention of calling, but he turned his steps in the direction of the house. Perhaps it was

with some vague hope of meeting Marcella. On his way he met Charley.

‘How long have you been here, Curteis?’ he asked.

‘Two days. My mother and cousin are here. I am going on the Lees to meet my cousin and a friend. Will you come too?’

They walked on together.

On the Lees Marcella was walking with Theo Stryne. It was a sparkling morning, with a brilliant sunshine and a crisp, bracing air, which, blowing inland from the sea, came invigorating and essentially grateful on nerves spent with the dissipations of the ball. Below in the channel the shimmering wavelets, tossed by the breeze, were wildly at play; whilst all around the clearness of the view lent to the spirits that largeness which comes with the consciousness of a spacious horizon.

The brightness of the girls’ faces, their light elastic tread, and their braced carriage, showed how readily their natures had re-

sponded to the nature of the day. Theo was speaking,

‘Well, Marcella, what you say is true. I know you have been showing up as awfully fast, or rather, do you know, it appears to me you have acquired the reputation of being awfully fast without doing anything very particular; always, of course, excepting last night. I have wondered at it, because what I heard, and what I saw of you, were so different. Of course, dear, I could not say anything, though I always felt your real self to be so much nicer than what was said about you. But, as you say, it all appears very incomprehensible. Perhaps you are right to go. Only I am very sorry, dear.’

‘You have promised to come and see me, remember.’

‘And I shall come. I want to see your home and all the things of which you have told me. I wish my life was more like yours. But you see, I am engaged in the enterprise

of selling my face for a large bid. After all it is amusing ; and sometimes I promise myself "Prince Charming," handsome, and kind, as well as awfully rich, after all. He is as likely to be discovered, I suppose, in my way as in any other. Sometimes, too, I get a little tired of the enterprise. It is just as the wind of my humour blows.'

They went on walking and talking. Presently Theo said, 'Ah, there is my gambler : somehow I thought he would appear.'

'Who, pray, is your gambler?' asked Marcella.

'Oh I should have told you. Last night I effected a very peculiar conquest. I played ministering angel to a poor man whom a gambling set had reduced to desperation. On the spur of an impulse I lent him some money, got a dreadful scolding from mamma, merited I think, and, later in the evening, received the grateful adorations of the poor man emerged from his difficulties. But here

he comes. I wonder who that is he has with him ? ’

‘ Oh, Theo, ’ exclaimed Marcella at the same moment, ‘ here is a man I detest, how tiresome ! ’

‘ Where, Marcella ? ’

‘ Hush ! ’

Charley and Rintearn came up to them lifting their hats. The greeting between the former and Theo slightly surprised Marcella, who was wondering something indefinite about Theo’s gambler. Then they paired off, Theo and Charley, Marcella and Rintearn.

Rintearn attempted to make conversation. It was long since they had met. He regretted he had not known she was at Folkestone. He wished he had been at last night’s ball. He trusted she had enjoyed herself. It was a beautiful morning.

Replies from Marcella, monosyllabic.

‘ Curteis perhaps told you, ’ he went on, ‘ I have accepted an invitation to Wyvenhome for this autumn. ’

‘Yes, he told us.’ She did not add that she also was invited.

‘I met him abroad.’

‘Yes?’—she thought, ‘It is odd how this man contrives to be more stupid each time I see him.’

‘We met at a railway station. Curteis had a friend with him, a Mr. Laurier.’

‘What did you think of Mr. Laurier?’ asked Marcella, relieved at the prospect of any topic of conversation other than Rintearn’s doings or her own; ‘since my cousin came here he has talked to us of nothing but his new friend.’

‘I thought him one of the hardest, most repellent of men I ever met,’ replied Rintearn emphatically.

‘Indeed! you surprise me. From what my cousin said I had formed a very favourable opinion of him.’

‘Oh, I daresay he is the sort of man some women would like,’ rejoined Rintearn cynically,

‘now that it has become the fashion to admire contemptuousness. Realism that is called, is it not?’

‘It may be for aught I know.’

‘Did Curteis mention to you Mr. Laurier’s views about women?’

‘Oh yes, of course,’ said Marcella with a smile.

‘And you admired him, perhaps, for them?’

‘I can easily understand a man not liking women. But I think what I admired in Mr. Laurier was his intelligence, if I rightly understood my cousin.’

‘Oh yes, Laurier is intelligent, and agreeable, and handsome too, and that, I presume, is the perfection of human nature in man, is it not, Miss Cassilys? unless a little contempt for the opposite sex be needing to give it tone.’

‘If you like to say so,’ answered Marcella icily.

She quickened her step, and coming nearer

to Charley and Theo, engaged in a close conversation, said,

‘Charley, Mr. Rintearn avows your new friend Mr. Laurier is abominable.’

‘Rintearn is prejudiced, you must not heed him, Marcella,’ replied Charley.

Theo looked from one to the other. ‘You two call each other by your christian names?’ she asked.

‘And you two, how came you to be so intimately acquainted?’ returned Marcella.

‘This is my cousin, Miss Stryne,’ explained Charley.

‘And then you,’ returned Theo with a merry smile, ‘are the incomparable cousin Charley, of whom I have heard so much. Dear me, Mr. Curteis, I know you twenty times better than I did half a minute ago.’

‘And is he not as nice as I said?’ asked Marcella.

‘I don’t know yet,’ was the coquettish reply.

Rintearn stood outside the circle of this merry play of words, mute, forgotten, moody.

‘But why have you two made so great a secret of knowing each other?’ inquired Marcella, ‘you never told me, Charley, nor you, Theo.’

‘One can’t tell about a thing before it happens,’ remarked Charley.

Marcella looked mystified. Suddenly a recollection of the gambler broke upon her.

‘Theo,’ she said, touching her friend’s arm, ‘it was never Charley?’

Theo looked at her, from the corners of her eyes, a look of half serious reproof; Charley at Theo, a look of interrogation. Then Theo glanced round and Charley’s eyes and hers met. Instantaneously Theo averted her face, and turning to Marcella with a little grimace, said, ‘You are a cat, Marcella.’

At this point Miss Cassilys became once more conscious of the presence of Rintearn, and

asserted they ought to return home. Theo was perfectly willing to accept an abrupt close for the time of her new flirtation with Charley, and the girls and men took leave of one another.

Charley invited Rintearn to walk, but the latter declined. He sat down on one of the seats and gave himself to his thoughts.

For a while the figures of Miss Cassilys and Miss Stryne could be still seen passing away in the distance, and so long he watched them. Then they were quite lost among others, and he leaned forward, listlessly, making scratches on the ground with his cane.

So passed nearly half-an-hour. Then he rose abruptly.

‘She *shall* be my wife, this Marcella Cassilys,’ he said to himself, and again repeated it with an intenser energy of mind.

He had first met her, more than four years before, at Cannes, where they happened to be staying for some weeks at the same hotel.

Rintearn was there with his father, come in the vain hope of prolonging a frail life which every expedient was unavailing to preserve, Marcella and her mother on a pleasure trip. An accident made them acquainted. Rintearn's courageous, determined faith in the recovery of his father, to whom he was at once nurse, son, companion, friend, and hope—hope that, by sympathy, might have wrought recovery, if anything could have done so, won first Mrs. Cassilys's, and then her daughter's interest. They began to see a good deal of each other. It was a boon to Rintearn to have some kindly ears into which to pour his histories of symptoms that appeared to him tokens of improvement in his father's health, and a change in his monotonous life, to drive, or walk, when not required by his father, with Mrs. Cassilys and her daughter.

The month was April. The hedges of the villas were heaped with roses ; new, pale green leaves shone bright among the grey of the

elder foliage in the olive yards; the fields of scented flowers, grown to make perfumes, filled the air with their odours; and the orange gardens were gay with white bridal flowers.

Who hopes is very near to love. Full of the hope of his father's recovery Rintearn strolled by Marcella's side in that world of sunshine and flowers, among the vineyards and orange blossoms, on the golden sands of the bay of Napoule, and under the Mimosa Avenue's shade, spangled with yellow flowers. With her he watched the evening light paint the beauties of the Estérel hills, sighted the far-off prospect of the Alps, and drank in the marvellous colours of earth and sky and azure sea, till the beautiful girl was his lady, his queen, the bride of his heart and soul.

And Marcella meanwhile—it was a way with her—went half way to a passion, and back again: a journey that legitimately occupies the same time as going the whole distance.

One day they took the steamer to Saint Honorat, and sat under the shade of the stone pines, among the asphodel flowers, and looked at the sea, that afternoon calm as eternity, and there Rintearn told his love. And Marcella had nothing to say except, 'I am so sorry, so very sorry.'

The next day she and her mother left Cannes.

'Good-bye, Miss Cassilys,' said Rintearn in reply to her farewell, retaining the while in his own her reluctant hand, 'Good-bye, and I hope it will not be long before we meet again. I love you,' he added softly, passionately, 'and shall love, till you give me love for love; and, Miss Cassilys, that day will come.'

So they parted.

There are two states of the soul, in themselves essentially distinct, which poets sometimes, fools always, and women seldom confound, passion, and love.

Love means a stock of common sentiments,

a consequent interchange of pleasures, a unity of sentient interests that excludes the possibility of jealousy. In love possession is but a means, not the end; and even infidelity does not detach the soul that loves. Love is tranquil, as all is tranquil that spends: for the little limit of man's strength compels him who gives of his own to lavish only as life supplies. And to give is the very being of love.

But passion is only the consciousness of the greatness, the grandeur of love tormenting the souls that have not the grace to give. It is a hope that is ever desiring, a desire that dies in gratification. It is a hunger like the hunger for gold; insatiable as man is always insatiable in taking. For to take is the end, to covet to take, the being of passion.

And this man's love for Marcella was simply a great passion, a gaunt, hungry love, of the kind that blunders in its will to make itself understood: a love like his own nature, unbroken, with strength enough and to spare

of the dauntless, unmeasured kind, immensely in earnest, and ready to dash itself to pieces against the impossibility of things.

If he had only had on what to expend some of his strength, his living to earn, or ambitions to compass, then he had never come to this passion for her. But with wealth enough and to spare, with no purpose of any kind in life, the whole of his indomitable nature—a sort of phenomenon of personified energy—threw itself into a burning passion for this girl.

In other lands and times, when all other passions were free too, in days of violence and shapeless unrule, when all men went armed, and every woman in fear, when the turns of fortune were countless, and sudden, and great, when life was cheap, and men had little and loved that little much, amid strong hatreds, daring deeds, and dreadful wants, such passions of men for women made no discord with their lives. But in the midst of ordered *conve-*

nances, of the smooth, protected lives of gentle breeding, they produce a shock like grim deformities.

Women are still to be found who like to be thus loved, to whom the strongest appeal a man can make is to unveil a passion resembling Rintearn's; but Marcella Cassilys was not of their number. For her it had no charm.

They had since met often, and he had allowed her no room to doubt of an assurance, on his part doggedly nourished, that perseverance should in the end win her consent to be his.

Marcella, irritated to a degree by a sense of pursuit, and positively annoyed to be loved in his strange, terrible fashion, firmly promised herself that consent should never be gained. But this was a man of a sort not daunted by words nor even by circumstances.

CHAPTER VI.

‘VITAM continet una dies.’ Let him who doubts it consider how accurate a perception of the odd man he once was, and of how greatly he since has changed, he might acquire, did it lie in his power to live to-morrow as he used to live his ordinary days, five, ten, twenty, forty years ago.

It was in her own bedroom in her mother’s house, in Villas Road, Kensington, that Marcella Cassilys the next morning, after a dreamless sleep, opened her eyes to the light.

The room was a fair sized one, prettily papered and coloured with cool grey tints, but singularly bare of furniture. There were no pictures, no cosy chairs, no writing table, none of the characteristic personal belongings that might

crowd a girl's room ; only a curtainless, wide brass bed, and, in solid plain pine, two wardrobes with tall mirrors panelled in their doors, some cane chairs, a dressing-table, and a large washing-stand. The chimney-piece was without ornament except china candlesticks ; but an oval mirror, the only thing on the walls, hung above it, low enough to be used for the toilet, and having the advantage of being in a cross light. The china on the toilet and washing-stand was tasteful but plain, and there were no nick-nacks, no doyleys, no covers on the grey marble slabs. Even the varnished floor was bare, save some slips of loose matting, and a rug spread with the requisites for a morning bath.

Though it was not warm, one of the windows had been all night partially open, and the room was almost chilly. :

Awakened the girl sprang at once from her bed.

It was a quarter to eight. When she left her room it was nine.

Her light morning attire, in which, with her white silver ornaments she looked, and felt too, fresh and bright as the new made day itself—a sharp sparkling autumn morn—justified to the full the time it had cost her; and Marcella descended the stairs with that satisfaction of the toilet, a species of having a good conscience respecting all they are wearing, which only women can understand.

In the dining-room, of which the window overlooked the street, breakfast was prepared for three. Marcella took up the *Morning Post*, and sat down by the window to await her mother's arrival.

A few minutes and Mrs. Cassilys entered the room. She was a woman about six and forty, of a just becoming embonpoint, with an imposing carriage and mien, and a charming, flattering smile. Her features, of a more classical type than her daughter's, suggested that of the two she might have been possibly the handsomer woman. Her auburn hair, of which she

was proud, was still magnificent, and she wore no cap. Whether toned by time or nature her face showed none of the resolution and intensity that was in Marcella's, but only an easy pleasantness, and a certain degree of highly fashionable insouciance.

Her daughter's eyes brightened at once. She rose and ran to her side, lightly kissing her cheek with 'Good-morning, mamma,' and then followed her to the window, where, whilst waiting for the coffee and warm dishes, Mrs. Cassilys amused herself with plucking withering blossoms off the heliotropes in a majolica jar.

'I resume the housekeeping, and may order what I like for my first dinner, mamma?' asked Marcella.

'Flo and I are going to dine at the Cravens; do you intend to feast at home?'

'A little, if I may.'

'If I say "Yes"?''

'I shall not be extravagant. Please say

“Yes.” Aunt’s ideas of dinners have been depressing.’

Her mother looked round with a smile that received another from Marcella for reply.

‘Little *gourmande*!’ said Mrs. Cassilys, ‘you are your father’s daughter.’

‘That means “Yes.” Thanks.’

‘Does it occur to you, Marcella, considering the little histories you had to tell me on your return yesterday, that you may lately have had enough of your own way?’

‘Not at all. That was Aunt Edith’s way. Had I had my own way I should have enjoyed myself more.’

‘You don’t really mean you enjoy having your own way?’ said Mrs. Cassilys laughing and turning to the table.

‘I do; and it seems to me to mean a good deal. I do not find that every person’s way when they get it gives them as much enjoyment as mine almost invariably gives me.’

‘Ah, Marcella, this sometimes goes too far, I fear,’ remarked her mother.

‘What goes too far?’

‘Your passion for enjoyment. In all seriousness, dear.’

‘I am quite serious in my appreciation of enjoyment,’ rejoined Marcella with emphasis.

‘Only too serious. But, dear, to be wise—’

‘Is to understand how to be happy. I know as well as you, mamma dear, how much rodomontade exists to the contrary, but in the end we all have to surrender to truth, and I prefer at once to accept facts as they are.’

They had sat down, and Mrs. Cassilys now commenced to commiserate herself about the cleaning of her drawing-room, which had been about to be begun all the summer, but was not begun yet.

‘You had better have it done whilst we are at Wyvenhome,’ suggested Marcella.

‘Yes, I suppose that must be the way, and I must at once set about preparations,’ rejoined

Mrs. Cassilys, proceeding in the most leisurely manner with her breakfast. ‘Dear me! I wonder whether any woman ever hated to be hurried as much as I?’

At this point there entered the room, in a toilet becoming indeed, but little beyond a picturesque deshabille, a girl between eighteen and nineteen, who for her colour and form might have sat for a picture of Propertius’ Cynthia. A great, tall maiden, with a skin of dazzling whiteness, with golden hair, and long, delicate hands, with a face rosy and white, of childlike loveliness, and a sunny light in her sparkling blue eyes.

‘Good-morning, Flo,’ said Marcella; ‘there is a letter for you from Aunt Edith.’

‘Another letter from mamma!’ moaned Florelle Curteis, her pretty smile fading at once, as she passed, from a kiss given Mrs. Cassilys, disconsolately to take up the letter.

It was long and took Flo an unconscionable time to decipher, without, to judge by her face,

affording her much besides annoyance. At length she refolded it, and, in silence, put it in her pocket.

‘What is the news, Flo?’ asked Mrs. Cassilys.

‘Oh, none,’ stammered the girl, ‘I am to get some things, and pay some bills for mamma.’ And she enumerated her commissions.

‘How much money has your mother sent you?’ inquired Mrs. Cassilys.

Florelle named a barely adequate sum, and added, with a sigh, ‘If it is not enough I am to pay the rest from my allowance. That will not leave me much, and mamma never remembers to return money.’

Breakfast was ended. Mrs. Cassilys proceeded to her drawing-room, for the cleaning of which she really was, at last, about to commence preparations. Florelle, evidently with some weight on her mind, requested to assist, as though loth to be with her cousin Marcella. Marcella herself went to the library.

This was a room on the first floor, formed

by throwing two apartments into one. At the further end, a sort of cell—they called it the study—was cut off from the rest by two bookshelves projecting from the wall, and leaving a narrow passage between them in the middle of the room. Here a Persian carpet covered the stained floor in other parts bare; in a tiled recess was a hearth and dogs for a wood fire; and a round, revolving library table stood in a light convenient for reading or writing. Around, were old oak chairs with tall carved backs, writing chairs, and low Spanish lounges. A bow window overlooked the garden, and around its bay ran a broad, low window-seat with padded back. Some engravings hung above the fireplace, and a clock, of almost noiseless movements, in a bronze renaissance case of considerable artistic merit. The furniture was covered in a slightly faded grey flowered velvet, whose colour pleasantly harmonised with the darker grey colouring of the curtains and the room.

On the table were some books, and a bouquet fresh but yesterday. A piece of embroidery, and another of plain needlework with a threaded needle fixed in it, and a wicker work-basket, lying on the window-seat, showed the picturesque nook was a wonted haunt of the inmates of the house.

Marcella sat herself at the table. A few minutes sufficed to make a *menu* for dinner, which was then sent to the cook. After this she nestled herself in the deepest corner of the window-seat, and taking the plain work, and a gold thimble from the work-basket, began busily stitching.

In the drawing-room Florelle assisted in the removal of the ornaments. At the end of ten minutes she came upon a little ivory box, about the size of a child's mug.

‘What is this, Aunt, she asked, ‘this little ivory box?’

‘A nest of little boxes one inside another. At least so I believe. I never opened it.’

‘ You never opened it ? ’

This was said with a little surprise. Florelle somewhat reluctantly set down the box on a tray with many other things.

‘ How many boxes are there inside, Auntie ? ’ she asked.

‘ Forty, or a hundred, or a thousand, or some other fabulous number,’ replied Mrs. Cassilys intent on something else.

‘ There could not be a thousand, nor a hundred, I should think,’ said Florelle, again taking up the box ; ‘ there might be forty.’

She once or twice turned the box in her hand, and then opened it. Another box dropped out ; a second, a third, and a fourth similarly followed.

‘ There really are little boxes inside, Auntie,’ said the girl, ‘ I wonder how many ? ’

One or two were put back. But the temptation to know the actual number contained one within another was too strong to be resisted. Presently Florelle exclaimed,

‘Aunty, do look, I have already taken out twenty. There seems to be no end to them.’

Surely enough, twenty little ivory boxes, in four neat rows of five, and a small heap of lids stood on the table before her.

‘For goodness sake, Flo, put the lids on each as you take it out, or you will never get them right.’

Though there were only twenty lids it did prove troublesome to fit them each on its right box. Then Florelle continued unpacking the nest.

‘I do believe there are a hundred,’ she said after a time; ‘I’ve got out eighty. But they are most awfully tiny now.’

Also each required much tapping and coaxing to extricate it. At last, though there were doubtless more, how many it was tantalisingly impossible to conjecture, no persuasion would dislodge them. Florelle began inquiring for device by which they might be loosened.

‘I think, my dear, you may quite as well amuse yourself by replacing those you have already unpacked,’ said Mrs. Cassilys.

Florelle looked hurt, but complied. Presently a clock struck a half hour.

‘Good gracious, Aunty, what a time I have been about these stupid little boxes!’ exclaimed Florelle commencing more rapidly to despatch them into one another. Then she knocked down a whole row. Nevertheless, the packing went on merrily, Florelle saying each time she put the boxes into the next larger, ‘Now you pop in there, and on goes the lid; and then you pop in there, and on goes the lid.’

Suddenly she came to a stop.

‘Oh, Aunty, I have left out a little one; I shall have to undo half of them—and they only come off one by one.’

‘Ah,’ rejoined her aunt, ‘I thought how it would end. However, now you have got them out you must get them in again.’

‘Oh, these nasty little boxes,’ mourned Florelle.

At length, however, though not without mishaps, all were replaced in their ivory case.

By that time Mrs. Cassilys, with the assistance of her housemaid, had done as much as she intended that morning to do. Expressing many regrets for the small assistance she had afforded, Florelle went to seek Marcella.

She found her still sewing.

‘Plain work as usual, Marcella?’ said Florelle, seating herself beside her. ‘I cannot imagine why, if you must work, you don’t do some kind of fancy work.’

‘I must sometimes work or do nothing, and I prefer to do a little work.’

‘Why, then, do you not do some sort of art-needlework, Miss Penelope?’

‘Because I cannot do it well enough to make it a work of art. This I can do very well. And, since you are in a didactic

mood, know, my dear, that doing a simple thing well is as much better than doing a fine thing badly, as doing something is better than doing nothing. Look at this, please.' She exhibited a long piece of the minutest even stitching, 'It is nothing to be ashamed of.'

'I believe you think you save money by it,' remarked Florelle contemptuously.

'I know I do.'

'Pshaw. All the work you do in a year is not worth twenty shillings.'

'Perhaps it is not,' replied the other, again steadily stitching on. 'If it is worth but five shillings, it would cost me the pleasure I can purchase for five shillings, to pay for it.'

'It would cost me a headache, Marcella, to calculate my pleasures as you do yours,' retorted Florelle going to the window to look out.

'Yet which, I wonder, leads the merrier life?'

'You, cousin, one ten times more happy

than mine. But that is because my mother is not yours, not for any other reason.'

'I beg to disagree with you. For that and other reasons too.'

'Your mother is awfully kind, Marcella,' observed Florelle, now kneeling on the window-seat with her elbows on the sill; 'I have not helped her a bit——'

'But mamma is not doing the drawing-room all alone?' asked Marcella, instantly putting down her work, and preparing to rise.

'Oh no. Ann was there. And she has done now. I found a stupid little ivory box full of boxes, and I wasted all the time counting them. How my mother would have scolded! And aunty took it all so good-humouredly. I do wish I was not such a baby!'

She sat down on the part of the window-seat opposite Marcella, and joining her hands behind her pretty head, leaned back, and looking up at the ceiling, said,

‘I should like to *be* something. Something worth being.’

Marcella, with her head bent over her sewing, looked up under her eyebrows, and asked, ‘What would you like to be, Flo?’

‘Oh, something different from other girls, something grand. It is so stupid to be a girl like any other girl, and nothing more. I should like to do something brave, something noble!’

‘For instance?’

‘Oh, well—let me think,’ Florelle changed her position for one more thoughtful. ‘Well, to save somebody’s life, or to do something grand for a man, to be his friend, to help him when every one turned against him. I should not want him to love me; that would spoil it all. I should enjoy something like that. I could be so brave, so different from what I am: if things would only let me.’

She was leaning her shoulder against the back of the seat. Her face was uplifted and

her blue eyes looking up into the sky. Suddenly she dropped them.

‘Instead I am nothing at all. Dear me!’

Silence ensued, disturbed only by the soft tick of the clock, and the steady movement of Marcella’s needle and hand. Every five or six seconds she looked up from her stitching to Florelle’s face, but she made no remark. Once or twice Florelle seemed about to speak and then checked herself. At length she rose, and sitting on the arm of a chair, abruptly observed, whilst she studied the appearance of her feet set side by side,

‘You have not told me anything about Folkestone, Marcella ; I wish you would.’

Marcella assented. In her narrative perhaps some things were suppressed. Anyhow, Florelle asked a good many questions, so many that her cousin said,

‘What makes you so curious about all that happened at Folkestone, Flo?’

‘Oh nothing,’ replied Florelle colouring.

There was again a short silence. Florelle left the chair, and returning to the window-seat remarked in an entirely different tone,

‘What a horrid man this Mr. Laurier, whom Charley is going to bring to Wyvenhome, must be.’

‘Has aunty written to you about him?’

‘More than once; I know he is perfectly dreadful, and I feel I dislike him already.’

‘I don’t feel any such thing. I am looking forward a little to seeing what sort of person he may be.’

‘You would like to know him. I thought so.’

‘Why did you think so?’

‘Oh I am sure you would like to know a handsome, cross, unusual man, with a something mysterious about him. You think all that manly and grand.’

‘I thought some things Charley told us about him interesting. And I cannot help imagining there must be a great deal of good in a man Charley likes so much.’

‘I see,’ observed Florelle, regarding the plaits of her dress with an air of sombre meditation; ‘some people fall in love with pictures, and some with the sweep of a dress, and now you are going to fall a victim to a description and “they say.”’

‘Flo, what a strange girl you are!’ expostulated Marcella.

‘But you are *éprise*?’

‘Not at all.’

‘You really won’t fall in love with this horrid Mr. Laurier?’

‘Why do you call him horrid? You know what Charley says. Cannot you be just, Flo?’

‘It seems difficult,’ objected Florelle. ‘You are quite sure, then, that you don’t care for him?’

‘For a man I have never seen? Certainly not. I am not impressionable, my dear. I have been half-way to a passion and back too many times to fling my affections at anybody.’

Was there a shade of bitterness in her tone? Perhaps.

‘Some day you may wish you had been more impressionable,’ rejoined Florelle. She began to sing,

Oh the Lady of the Lea ;
Fair and young and rich was she :
Fanciful exceedingly,
The Lady of the Lea.

But at last in love fell she
The Lady of the Lea :
Still she set his suit aside,
So he left her in her pride,
And broken-hearted drooped and died,
The Lady of the Lea.

Then she went away to write her letter, though Marcella suggested it might be written where she was.

In the afternoon they went shopping. Poor Florelle’s money flew fast, accompanied by many a sigh. In a music shop Marcella approached her mother and said, *sotto voce*, ‘Look at Flo.’

The poor child was wistfully turning over some new music, with the consciousness she had not a penny to spend.

‘Her mother ought to be ashamed of herself,’ observed Mrs. Cassilys.

They drove to Madame Louise’s. Florelle alighted with a heavy heart, thinking of the money she had to leave there. As soon as they had entered the shop, Marcella went to the *comptoir*. After a few minutes she returned to Florelle with a bill in her hand.

‘With my love, my dear,’ she said.

It was Florelle’s bill receipted.

At first Florelle could not understand what had happened. When she did, and it broke upon her that she had between fifteen and twenty pounds to spend as she listed, the tears came into her eyes, and she kissed Marcella in the shop.

On their return home Mrs. Cassilys expostulated, ‘Marcella, you cannot afford to give away money like that. It is Mrs. Curteis who should find Flo in funds.’

‘Only she does not, and it makes my heart ache to see poor Flo crave as she does, for

little things, with a knowledge she cannot afford them. As for the money, I countermanded the piano for the library. You need not fear my exceeding my income. I have too great respect for my own convenience.'

Mrs. Cassilys said no more. But she knew that a piano for the library was a pleasure Marcella had been promising herself for two years.

In spite of her present Florelle was looking piteous. When she and Mrs. Cassilys came down dressed for dinner her eyes wore a suspicious appearance of recent tears. In her hands was a thick letter, the reply to her mother's. About it she was palpably distressed, and, at the same time, evidently desirous her distress should not be perceived. But Florelle was a poor adept at any art of concealment. She with reluctance gave up the letter to be posted, and then, in a dreamy mood, followed her aunt to the carriage that awaited them. When they were gone Marcella dined.

Men can dine alone ; women, for the most

part, under such circumstances, merely eat. Miss Cassilys was an exception, and dined very well, and with excellent appetite, in the space of an hour and a half. Her *menu*, though not extravagant, was successful, and the cellar afforded her a wine she liked; for, plainly, Marcella was spoiled.

Dessert ended, she went to the back drawing-room and sat down to muse by the fire, leaning back in the round-backed arm-chair, with her elbows and hands reposed on its arms, and her feet stretched out to the genial blaze, with a trifle more carelessness of pose that she would have assumed if not alone. It was the first fire of this autumn by which she had sat, and its flames made flickering thoughts of time, and measures of time, of days lengthening and shortening, past and to come.

The servant brought coffee, Marcella for the minute changing her posture. Then she again set herself more at her ease, shading her eyes from the flames with a light fire-screen, thinking

all astray, and sipping her coffee and cream. Lovingly her eyes wandered round the tasteful, dark-coloured room, surveying its slightly severe furniture, its vases and bronzes, the tall over-mantel, the soft engravings, the flowers in a classic cache-pot relieved against the heavy folds of the curtains.

‘Life is a pleasant thing,’ she mused; ‘somebody told me its pleasure was all in ourselves, but I doubt it.’

She rang for the coffee to be removed, and then spread on her knees a book she had brought from the library.

It was the ‘Vita Nuova,’ and a splendid copy.

There are those who find an *édition de luxe* no better to read than the cheapest. The touch of fine paper gives them no pleasure, nor the black relief of brilliant, shapely types on its surface. Comely proportions of margins and text escape their studious eyes, and nothing at all to them is the thick, old, pure gold on the edge of mellowed leaves, nor the binding on

which a man laboured as on a piece of art, taking the thought of his work to his pillow.

Of these was not Marcella. To her, fine paper, chaste design, and handsome type were an apparel without which she found something taken away from a great master's thoughts.

She bent her eyes on the book and began to read. Commencing such works, the mind receives a species of emotional shock; the sensation of coming in contact with an entity above its own. The story was not new to her, but that made no difference. In a little time it had drawn her into itself, by that spell of power and beauty the greatest masters wield to win thought away from all else to converse with them alone.

It was a striking tableau: the choice room, the genial flames, the still, quiet light, and the handsome, luxurious girl, reclined at her ease in her chair, immersed, as she turned page after page, in the divine Florentine's love.

Maidens read much of masculine love, in

poetry, history, romance, and none love to read of it more than the best of them. Marcella was no exception; and to her thinking no love was ever told like that of Dante for Beatrice.

Now and again the page remained unturned, as deep reveries would rise out of the meaning of single lines. For what does the world contain which a woman would know in preference to how a great man loves? But Marcella was often baffled, and went on again with the thought, 'To understand one must have loved, and I have never loved.'

When the others returned, the book was finished, but she was still musing over it. Mrs. Cassilys stayed in the room but a minute. Florelle remained crouched by the fire.

'I am so cold, Marcella,' she said, 'and we have been so hideously dull. It is strange that some people cannot be agreeable even when they have agreeable things to say. How have you spent the evening?'

‘Dining, reading, thinking, making discoveries.’

‘What have you discovered? please tell me. I feel so dreadfully in want of something to amuse me.’

Florelle moved from her seat, and taking her place on the floor at Marcella’s feet, leaned her pretty head against her knees, like a tired child, whilst her eyes gazed on the fire.

‘Do you really care to hear?’ said her cousin, putting aside the book. ‘Well then.—To think well a woman should be well dressed.—To judge a man you must know the secrets not only of his thoughts, but of his misfortunes.—To understand some books you must have led a particular kind of life.—Girls such as you and I are to blame if we are not very happy girls.’

‘I am not happy,’ said Florelle. ‘Dear me! it is only four days before we go back to Wyvenhome. I wish I could always stay here. Even then I should not be happy, though, because I have a bad nature.’ Her tone

changed abruptly, and she went on, 'Marcella, you gave me this afternoon what comes to nearly eighteen pounds. I wish you would take them back, Marcella. I—I don't—Perhaps mamma will not like it.'

'Really?'

'No, not really.'

Florelle rose and walked across the room and back. Then she knelt by her cousin's side, and hiding her face on her shoulder began,

'Oh, Marcella, I am a wretch. You should not give *me* things. I've written to mamma so wicked a letter about you, about all the things you told me this morning, which she wrote to me to ask you about. And I have not written quite the truth, only mamma would have scolded me so if I had not written. Oh, Marcella, what shall I do?'

'Why, forget it, Flo. What use is it to fret over things that cannot be altered? You have not done much harm, Flo. Auntie is curious, but she is not very particular to read your

letters. She says "Ah, only Flo," just glances at this and that, and then throws the letter into the fire. There now, don't look surprised' (Florelle was staring with infantine wonder to hear how letters that cost so much trouble to write were received), 'and come, kiss me.'

But Miss Cassilys deceived herself. Not all Florelle's letters to her mother were perused with indifference.

The kiss was given, and Marcella said, 'Now, Flo, forget it. Nothing unpleasant is worth remembering. Will you play me something?'

'I would do anything for you, Marcella,' replied Florelle. She rose and went to the piano in the other drawing-room. As she began playing Marcella got up from her seat, and crossing to the sofa laid herself upon it, supporting her head on her hand and musingly regarding the fire. Florelle played unusually well, and the liquid stream of sounds came upon Marcella's senses, strung with emotional

thought, with a weird strong fascination, like a spell drawing her onwards, onwards to a something unknown. If the music stopped, she would say in a low voice, 'Thanks : please go on, Flo,' and that was all.

Now Florelle was playing Weber's last waltz. When she ceased, there came neither thanks nor request to continue. A moment she waited with her hands in her lap ; then she turned on the music-stool and looked behind her.

Marcella lay on the sofa, her white neck arched and her head thrown back. Her lips were parted, her eyes could not be seen. Florelle approached her. As she came near her cousin opened her eyes, in a dazzled, semi-conscious look. A light smile passed over her features and she said,

'You should not have stopped.'

'Marcella, get up,' said Florelle impatiently, 'you will be having nerve fever or something horrible.'

Marcella laughed and obeyed, and together the girls went upstairs. Florelle had again become melancholy. At her bedroom door her cousin bade her good-night.

‘You have not forgotten, Flo,’ she said; ‘take my advice, you will never be happy until you learn to forget what is unpleasant.’

‘How strange a girl Marcella is,’ thought Florelle undressing, ‘yet I do love her.’

CHAPTER VII.

THE sun is setting at Wyvenhome. One by one or in twos and threes the ladies leave the drawing-room to dress for dinner. Only Marcella remains standing near one of the tall windows, watching the fading, changing lights. In her face is the shadow of a chagrin she has been labouring hard to dispel.

The king of day himself has passed from sight behind his curtains of amber and gold, but he has not yet touched the tops of the western hills in the distance of soft undistinguishable grey.

Over the quiet grounds, over lawns and gardens of autumn flowers scatters the fading light; over the stilly park, richly wooded with lines of elms and stately solitary oaks, over

downland beyond, and beeve-cropped meadow, and plodding stream, over the rising ground that is behind and to the right and left of the house, the berried hedges, the murmuring plantations of pines, the beechwood, and copse, and where the yellow gorse spreads on the flinty heath. Every moment it makes more beauties of moving light, of ruddy tone, and of tender shade than ten lifetimes could suffice to see—red lights fading to steely reflections among the sougling reeds of the mere—unwonted colouring tossed among the tarnishing foliage of oaks and limes—a blaze on those windows that chance to make equal angles with the sun and the spectator's eye—and, far from least impressive, a weird glow, black barred by the young ash stoles, that meets the eyes of the sportsmen issuing by an upward path through the woods, on their return from the moor to the house.

In the same gloaming was coming along the level brow of the hill, on the road that led

through the grounds to the station, a dog-cart driven by Charley with Laurier at his side. Its lofty wheels ran crisply over the slightly damp flint road, a brace of pointers trotting by the side, and the high-stepping mare in the shafts holding her beautiful head as though her work was a pleasure. Charley, often interrupting his discourse to indicate objects that passed in view, was engaged in a characteristic enumeration of the party at Wyvenhome.

He had got so far as, 'The Twisdens ; Twisden of Beaches. Two of them here with their father. Capital fellows. Tom Twisden is the best judge of a horse I know. Father, a quiet old man ; good shot though. Next, let me see. My cousin Miss Cassilys. Now, Laurier, if you could like a woman—well, if you will look like that I'll suppose you can't. Somehow, though, I could imagine your appreciating Marcella Cassilys. Her mother is with us too. The best natured woman breathing.'

He continued in the same strain. All the

men were 'good fellows,' 'capital shots,' or otherwise endowed above the ordinary sort of mortals; all the ladies, 'capital girls,' or 'pleasant women.'

At the end, 'Then the last two, Hunt Keppel and Jack Rintearn, you have met. Keppel will be down in a day or two. He is an old friend of my mother's. For the rest I daresay you know as much about him as I. He is a man of influence, you know; with passports into the very best society, and all that kind of thing. Respecting Rintearn, excuse a warning. Be a little cautious what you say in his presence. There is not a better fellow breathing, nor a more fearless, nor a more thorough sportsman, but at present he is just mad about my cousin; I mean Miss Cassilys. He is making an awful ass of himself, he is, in fact, very, very far gone; you no doubt guessed something of his temperament when you saw him and will understand. He is a thoroughly good fellow though. It is all

my mother's fault. She would, in spite of all we could say, have him and Miss Cassilys here at the same time. I fear my poor cousin will have her visit somewhat spoiled.'

'That will be something new, Curteis, for a woman to object to the attentions of a future lord.'

'Ah, but Rintearn is a rabid sort of admirer, and the lady cannot quite make up her mind that she likes it.'

'Amusing.'

'No, that is just what it is not. They have been but two days together, and we have already had one exhibition of sulks from Rintearn.—Look, there is Wyvenhome, a pretty place, is it not? This is one of the best views of it.'

He drew up for Laurier to take time to survey the prospect. Before them the ground in an amphitheatre closed the head of a broad valley of some length. In its centre, nearer the base than the crown of the rising ground,

stood a white house of two storeys, from either wing of which terraces planted with trees spread enclosing a semicircle. Below, the lawns, and a finely timbered park, extended down the valley, and crept up the sides of the hills. Above and behind, woods, and copses, and a common made a background to which the passing light gave a more than ordinary charm of indistinctness and shade.

From the point where they halted a drive of little more than a quarter of an hour brought them to the house.

Mr. Curteis made his guest a pleasant welcome. He turned out to be a tall, light-haired man, who held himself very erect, with a thin, careless-looking face, and an even voice. For the rest, Laurier soon discovered Mr. Curteis to be a man who liked things to roll on of themselves in a comfortable way. If they would not, that was by no fault of his, and little disturbed his equanimity.

To the remainder of the party Laurier was

introduced before dinner in the drawing-room. Mrs. Curteis's welcome was a piece of formal courtesy faultlessly performed. Florelle gave him a distant bow. The sterling good-heartedness of Mr. Twisden and his sons showed itself in their first half-dozen words.

Mrs. Cassilys had the tact to say she had heard of him, and added on the subject something agreeable, which, moreover, proved that what she said was true.

Marcella was the last to be introduced. When he came in she was seated in one of the further corners of the room slowly turning over an album of etchings on a side table. She was taking no heed of who entered the room, but presently, 'Mr. Twisden, Mr. Laurier,' fell on her ears, and she looked up.

So this is the celebrated Mr. Laurier: a dark, handsome man.

Her examination of the new comer, continued in a succession of momentary glances, goes on simultaneously with the study of the etchings.

A group of mountain ashes. A marvelously skilled piece of cross hatching. By H——. Ah; no wonder it is good.—A second look at Laurier. Yes, he certainly gives one the impression of a hard man.—Those ashes are very beautiful.—As she turns the page she glances up again. A fine face though.—What is this? Death and the old man with the bundle of sticks. That is turned over on the spot.—Another look. Laurier is listening to someone speaking, and in the meantime he snatches a side glance at Florelle, whose forced bow he is mentally discounting. Marcella looks longer, measuring his look with a fixity of gaze that bespeaks an irresistible attraction of curiosity. The man's glance has power, and the spell of its influence, though not turned on herself, finds a kind of echo in her nature, although it strikes on it only obliquely. She begins to understand how he may be a man with whom under guilty circumstances it would prove hard to have to do.—

Again her eyes drop. Another page is turned, and the book shifted to bring in view an etching that is across the page. But she scarcely sees it, and her eyes again seek Laurier. It is impossible not to admire this man's face and the play of his features. He is talking to her mother. She will go and be introduced.

Mrs. Cassilys has concluded her flatteries, and sees Marcella approaching. She says, 'Let me introduce you to my daughter.'

The rustle of a dress. 'Mr. Laurier, my daughter,' from Mrs. Cassilys, then two slight inclinations exchanged.

So Laurier became acquainted with Marcella Cassilys.

The journey of life is like a journey on a railroad. Occasionally, when things are mismanaged, the transit from stage to stage is performed with alarming bustle and inconvenience; but, more often, the traveller, thinking of nothing less, glides unwittingly over an

insignificant set of points, which, for all that, determine different courses, and destinations wide apart.

‘My cousin,’ began Marcella pleasantly, ‘is never tired of talking of his tour abroad with you, Mr. Laurier, and of his good fortune in meeting you.’

Meanwhile Laurier has realised that this extremely fashionably dressed, flattering daughter of a flattering mother, is the woman Charley could imagine him appreciating.

But the gong announced dinner. Mr. Twisden had just taken Mrs. Cassilys on his arm. No one else was near, and Laurier offered his to Marcella, and they went in to dinner together.

Certainly he might have done worse. For somehow the two fell at once on a happy vein of playful talk about things of the commonest kind, which lasted almost without interruption till the ladies rose. It was just that sort of purposeless chit-chat which assorts so well with

a meal, setting fancy adrift without awakening thought; a tinkling of words, easy, amusing; a light texture of remark, flashes of nonsense, conceits to awaken passing smiles, and obvious openings for repartees; a converse artificial of purpose; a pretty toying with speech, with no object beyond the moment's diversion. Abundant wit on either side was at hand to keep the game going, and a more than sufficient difference of mind existed to give it entertaining brightness; his view, always hard and incisive, and faintly cynical, hers finished and luxurious, not without a touch of feeling, contrasting, when mixed with ready good temper on both sides, to make the most bizarre combinations.

From the other side of the table, Rintearn, by whom Marcella had been the previous evening correspondingly dull, saw, and disapproved.

‘Because he is a woman scorner, she can laugh with him,’ he mused, and his man’s heart revolted at the abasement of the girl.

As the ladies left the room Florelle stood aside in the hall, and letting the others file past stopped Marcella.

‘To judge from appearances your curiosity is not only satisfied but gratified,’ she sneered.

‘My curiosity—h’m,’ replied Marcella, taking her arm and making with her a little detour, ‘Well, yes and no. Mr. Laurier is an amusing man, and can make a girl enjoy her dinner ; a quality, Flo, not to be disparaged, but—my interest in him is a little dispelled. He is not, it seems, what he looks.’

‘Of what have you been talking so busily all dinner time, then?’

‘Of positively nothing, but to my great amusement.’

‘A sort of conversation Mr. Laurier probably conceives best suited to Miss Cassilys’s intelligence. Let us follow the others into the drawing-room.’

On joining the ladies in the drawing-room Rintearn made the mistake of freely abusing

Laurier to Marcella. So strong was his insistence that nothing remained for her to say except, 'If the case be so, I can only say I regret it.'

'You like this man, then?' blurted out Rintearn with temper.

For all answer Marcella just perceptibly elevated her delicate eyebrows.

Rintearn perceived his mistake, not how to correct it. If he might have said, 'Heaven help you, love, I am only fain to stand between your weakness and your shame,' he could have said it in a way to do credit to his heart and cure to that of a woman. But this kind of thing is not said.

Whilst he doubted Florelle came and asked Marcella to join her in a duet. Rintearn stayed to hear it concluded, and then went to the smoking-room.

Hither Tom Twisden had preceded him and taken a seat near Laurier.

'In the drawing-room you are being

amusingly, but most seriously discussed, Mr. Laurier,' he said lighting his cigar.

'I hope the verdict is not too unfavourable.'

'Quite the contrary. The handsomest woman in the room is, with all the zeal in the world, defending the cause of the misogynist before her astonished and inconsolable admirer.'

'Explain.'

'Well, you know who is the handsomest woman here.'

'Mrs. Cassilys, Miss Curteis, or who?'

'By Jove,' laughed Twisden, 'have you no eyes? It is Miss Cassilys who is taking your part, and snubbing poor Rintearn to madness.'

'I'm sure I am duly obliged to Miss Cassilys, but I think of the two I should prefer the good opinion of Mr. Rintearn, if that is all the same to her.'

'Oh, come, that is not fair,' rejoined Twisden, 'you must not depreciate the Cassilys. She is a good, straightforward girl. Proud as Lucifer, if you will, but no mischief maker.'

‘A woman, and no mischief maker! Odd remarked Laurier stoically.

About three quarters of an hour afterwards he found himself alone with Rintearn. There was a little balcony to the smoking-room, commanding by day a pretty view of a part of the grounds, now only of cold dark shadows of tree clumps, and a cloudless starry night. Laurier, leaning with his back against the iron railings, was finishing a cigar. Rintearn came out with his pipe.

A few words were exchanged regarding the fineness of the night.

In the interim it passed through Laurier’s mind that the present was an opportunity to make use of Charley’s warning, and at once to execute for good a treaty with Rintearn.

‘I am sorry, Mr. Rintearn,’ he said, ‘that I usurped your place at dinner. I should tell you Curteis has mentioned to me a little tenderness of yours in that quarter, which, I think, I am to understand is no secret. I hope

I have not been very much in the way, and that I may shortly, if not now, have the pleasure of congratulating you.

Rintearn was leaning with his elbows on the railing and looking over. It was some seconds before he spoke.

‘Thanks,’ he said ; ‘should you have thought that, though I have for years wooed that girl, till now no living soul has ever wished me good speed with her? Well, it is so. You are the first.’ He raised himself, and offering his hand went on, with all the strong energy of his temperament, ‘I thank you, Mr. Laurier.’

Laurier put his hand in the other’s, which closed upon it with a grasp that gave him pain.

CHAPTER VIII.

DID any human being ever make a really free choice? or, to express the question in the way Theo Stryne put it before herself, 'I do wonder whether awfully clever people really are able to find out what they would like, when they don't know?'

Perhaps not. For the selection out of many things of one that appears preferable is not a free choice, but a following of inclination. And if none appeared in any way preferable, the chooser would be assuredly in Theo's perplexity of 'having to find out what he liked when he did not know.'

Under these circumstances he would probably take advice, which, by the way, is not choosing; which, also, Theo was determined not to do, for a reason seekers of advice

may with advantage remember, 'Because one never knows what advice people are going to give.'

So Theo strolled slowly on, swinging her parasol, and thinking somewhat thus:

'These new boots hurt awfully.—I'm absolutely sure I could very happily marry Mr. Meyrick; I like him quite enough to be comfortable with him, and I cannot see any motive for saying him "No."—These boots do hurt horribly.—I am quite certain I shall be every whit as happy without marrying Mr. Meyrick. I may easily discover a man richer, or whom I like better, and I cannot perceive any very forcible reason why I should say, "Yes."—These boots are simple torture.—I am positive I would just as soon accept Mr. Curteis as Mr. Meyrick. He is awfully nice, and to marry him would be quite an adventure. Though I don't know why I should do it.—These boots are really too excruciating.—I am convinced I could without heartache refuse

Mr. Curteis this minute, and I cannot perceive why, if he were to ask me, I should not.— Oh, these quite too awful boots.'

Unfortunate Theo. To have been ready to accept Mr. Meyrick but for Charley, or to wait for Charley but for Mr. Meyrick had been a case hard enough, but to have to say 'Yes' to one, and 'No' to the other, or 'No' to both, without a shadow of preference for any one of so perfect an olla podrida of choices, was appalling.

Mr. Meyrick she knew was going to ask this morning, and Charley, some other morning; which came to much the same thing. She had no more doubt about Charley, though his morning might not come for six months, than about Mr. Meyrick.

Theo was of the number of women who know at once the man on whom they have made an impression, and who will and who will not some day ask for the honour of their love.

And to dally with both was no solution of

the paradox, for she had no less inclination to say something definite than nothing or anything.

‘Only something or another I shall have to say,’ mused Theo. ‘If Marcella Cassilys were here, I’d ask her—no! I would not, though, for I *do* know exactly what she would say, “Choose whichever you like best;” and I don’t like anything best—except that I should like to take off these boots.’

She had made no further advance with her difficulties, when, a little later, Devergail met her.

‘What do you do, Mr. Devergail, when you cannot make up your mind?’ asked Theo.

‘I toss, Miss Stryne.’

‘But suppose it is something a little too serious to toss about?’

‘I toss all the same.’

Theo took a few steps in silence. Certainly it was all pure matter of chance what she should say to Mr. Meyrick, for of one thing she was

sure, that her mind was entirely unequal to deciding, and the last moment's 'Yes' or 'No' would depend only upon which way the tip of her tongue might happen to turn. Plainly, to toss up whether she should marry a man or not had an ugly sound about it, but then she was not going to toss, only Mr. Devergail for her. It would be amusing, and afterwards she need not abide by the result of the toss. Of course, she would not think of anything so silly. So she said,

'I wish you would toss for me, Mr. Devergail.'

'Pon my soul, with all the pleasure in life, Miss Stryne.'

Said Theo, 'Now I must think. Heads are "Yes," and tails are "No," are they not?' She continued mentally, 'The first shall be for Mr. Meyrick, because I knew him first.' Then again aloud, 'I have thought, now toss.'

Devergail balanced a half-crown on his thumb and first finger. The next instant it

flew spinning and glittering into the air followed by Theo's eyes, and then downwards again, coming with a little tumble on the dust of the road.

Tails.

'Very good,' said Theo, 'now toss again,' and she said in herself, 'this is for Mr. Curteis.'

Again tails.

'Oh, that is not what I meant,' exclaimed Theo, who began now to understand herself. 'I don't think I shall'—'refuse both,' she had almost said.

'Tossing won't always come just as you wish,' explained Devergail.

'Then one must toss till it does,' replied Theo. 'Come, Mr. Devergail, try again.'

She was now interested, and determined to see out her play to the end.

Mr. Meyrick, tails. Charley, heads.

'Now,' said Theo, 'that is practicable.'

Of course she had no intention of heeding whose chance fell heads, or whose tails. She

had only tried an experiment to see what would result.

Devergail in vain pressed to have made known to him the subject he had so importantly assisted to decide. Whilst he was still so occupied, Mr. Meyrick joined them, and a manner in his tone with Theo persuaded Devergail to withdraw.

Upon that Mr. Meyrick tried his fortune. He was voluble, and Theo (from which the man augured hope) let him talk on, for it afforded her time to think; not, however, to come at any decision. At length a moment arrived when to make him some reply had become imperative.

‘Yes; no; no; yes; you must really wait; what on earth am I going to say?’ thought Theo. ‘I’ll say “yes”; I may as well say “no”; I’ll say “no”; perhaps I had better say “yes”; I am sure I don’t know what I shall say; yes; no; no; yes; whichever I say, I might as well have said the other; I can’t tell what I am

going to say ; Mr. Meyrick's chance came tails, I'll say "no."

And she did say 'No.' Mr. Meyrick was refused, prettily, but little to his own satisfaction. In the afternoon he returned to town ; for the time broken-hearted.

Theo went home to luncheon. 'I should not much like it known,' she thought, 'what led to my refusal ; but as I do not care the least bit, perhaps it is well events fell out as they did. I wonder how I shall find papa and mamma.'

Papa and mamma were in excellent tempers. Papa had for luncheon a new sort of confection of prawns ; and mamma had seen Theo in boots smaller than any that had tortured her before. At luncheon Theo made a little merry over having refused Mr. Meyrick.

Mr. Stryne, an immensely stout man, whose fat nose and cheeks and chin seemed to threaten the obliteration of his mouth, approved. In a munching voice, a contrivance of sounds some-

where between suction and spluttering, he averred Meyrick to be a man who did not know how to eat. Of such men Mr. Stryne (who incontestably did know how to eat) had a low opinion. Theo had been as usual a sensible girl to refuse to chain herself to inanition.

Mrs. Stryne, a tall woman with sharp features, but still good looking, and in the days of the Great Exhibition what then passed for fast (that is very like an ordinary girl of these later days), was not quite so sure Theo had shown wisdom. In fact for a few drear minutes her daughter with reason apprehended a simoom. It was three thousand a year that Theo had refused, and Mrs. Stryne remarked with truth, 'Three thousand a year is not to be had when you choose.'

'Theo can do better,' munched out Mr. Stryne.

'Three thousand is all very well for girls of six-and-twenty who cannot afford to wait,' remarked Theo.

‘Well said, Theo,’ applauded her mother, ‘that was like a girl of spirit. But remember, we shall expect you to put it into practice.’

Theo had two brothers, one in India, and one in business in town, both doing excellently well, and the now only remaining ambition of the old folks was that Theo should make a ‘good match,’ and fill up the measure of parental content to the brim, with the flattering knowledge that all the bairns had turned out successful.

Whilst Theo was now musing how many or how few thousands Charley might have, luncheon was interrupted by the unexpected arrival of an unusually large hamper. There was some discussion respecting to whom it was sent, for the writing of the address was indistinct, but Theo insisted it was a present to herself. In the interim it was opened. Inside was only a card, Mr. Charles Curteis, with ‘*Bon Appetit*’ on the back (this last was

Marcella's not Charley's idea), and beneath, game, and such game !

Mr. Stryne's mouth watered at the sight of it. 'What is that he has written on the back of the card, Theo ?' he asked.

Theo explained.

'Sensible fellow,' quoth Mr. Stryne.

'I'll never toss about anything again,' thought Theo, assisting to unpack the really handsome present, 'only to think Mr. Meyrick's chance might have come heads, and how sorry I should be now.'

CHAPTER IX.

A BEAUTIFUL morning, and Florelle swinging in her hand her light straw hat on her way down the western terrace to join her cousin in her preparation of bouquets for the house.

Artifice had seldom produced a spot more beautiful than that Marcella had selected for their work. Springing from level, well-kept lawns, a double row of elms flanked on either side a wide walk on which from their branches fell still, irregular shades, now dense, now thin, now broken with patches of light. The trees, not very close, had attained to grand proportions, and the regularly circling curve of the broad, red gravel walk, the strips of green lawn hemming it, the ordered brown tree trunks on both sides, and the granite balustrade

of a soft cold grey, sweeping round in parallel lines, amidst every irregularity of colour, light, and shade, unfolded in slowly moving perspectives singularly picturesque and grateful to the eye.

The balustrade that bounded the terrace was broken at intervals by broad stone seats. On one of these, where the overspreading boughs of an elm cast a shade riddled with spots of light, sat Marcella leaning back in the corner idly gazing on the distant view. In her lap was a heap of green leaves and flowers, and on the ground by her side a great basket full to overflowing of fuchsias, pinks, crimson and purple asters, a mass of variegated leaves and a quantity of scarlet amaryllis, some of which had fallen and lay scattered on the edge of her dress by her feet. Behind her the trees of the curving avenue, with shadows deepening from dark greens and browns to black, made, at a little distance, a strong and sombre background that threw into quiet relief, herself,

her pink morning dress, and her light touched flowers.

‘Marcella,’ asked Florelle as she sat down beside her, ‘did I hear aunty say she wished to talk to you about something?’

‘Yes. I hope it is nothing disagreeable, but her looks misgave me.’

‘Yes,’ said Florelle—it was a long, half-amused, half-commiserating yes—‘I expect she is going to talk to you about getting married, Marcella.’

‘Mamma never did such a thing in her life.’

‘Then she will begin now. I know how mamma looks on such occasions, something between cross and ashamed, and aunty has the very air of it. I pity you, my dear. It is so horrid.’

An hour later Marcella sought the library. Mrs. Cassilys already awaited her. She was not altogether at her ease, and her daughter had time to observe it before she took a seat near her, and asked,

‘ You wished to speak to me of something. mamma ? ’

It was a maxim of Miss Cassilys’s that a vexatious affair, if unavoidable, should be got through as promptly as possible.

‘ Yes, dear,’ replied her mother with a little hesitation.

‘ Of what mamma, frankly ? ’

‘ Frankly, then, of your marriage, Marcella.’

‘ Ah,’ exclaimed the girl with the sort of quickness a person might use if stung.

She rose as she spoke and crossed, not without some indication of agitation, to the window, where for a moment she stood, looking out. Then she turned, and without regarding her mother, whose eyes had questioningly followed her, sat herself on the nearest chair, and asked,

‘ Well, mamma ? ’

‘ Well, dear ; there is here, and you know it, a man who would be glad to make you his

wife, and whom I, Marcella, should be well enough pleased to see you marry——’

‘Mr. Rintearn?’

‘Yes.’

‘Whom I might not mind marrying,’ replied the girl, looking her mother in the face, and speaking moderately slowly, ‘if it were a mere question of marrying, but with whom I should be very sorry to be condemned to live.’

‘That is taking back what you say as soon as you have said it,’ replied her mother a little disappointed.

‘It is. I have not yet seen the man whose wife I should care to be.’

‘You will be twenty-three in a few months, Marcella, and you have been out four seasons.’

‘Five.’

‘Dear me! five, so it is,’ assented Mrs. Cassilys, after a pause, ‘and you have never seen a man to whom you would have given yourself; I do not say to whom you would give yourself now?’

‘You press me hard, mamma,’ replied the daughter, with some pride, ‘Well, yes, once, after my first season, when we were abroad, do you remember an Englishman with a great beard whom we met at Lucerne? I think I was a little smitten with him, till I heard him, when attempting to speak German, say, “*Ich habe geglaubt*.” That was too much. I could not encourage a man who *belove* things.’

Mrs. Cassilys laughed. ‘I fear, dear,’ she said, ‘your affection was not very strong if it broke down over a past participle.’

‘It was not I but he that broke down over the past participle.’

‘And since?’

‘I have seen men I have merely liked, nothing more.’

‘Time passes, Marcella.’

‘All too fast.’

‘Well then, my dear, should you not think?’

‘I have thought, do think, often.’

‘Well, love, what must I say?’ rejoined Mrs. Cassilys. She moved to a chair nearer her daughter’s, and caressingly took her hand on her knee. ‘You know this sort of talking is not my forte, but you and I are alone, my girl, your cousins, these Curteises, excepted, who are’—Mrs. Cassilys shrugged her shoulders—‘and I should regret your by-and-by having a sense I had not been a just mentor. Only, only, I mean you may think you have a right to more counsel than you get from me.’

‘No,’ said the girl pensively, ‘you are very good to me. Say on.’

Like one embarrassed Mrs. Cassilys continued for some seconds to toy with the girl’s hand before she again spoke, ‘My dear, you have had proposals made to you, and other attentions quite unmistakable paid you, by men whom girls above you in station would have welcomed. This has been continuing five years, and still you go on your own way, as though youth lasted for ever——’

‘I would it did,’ put in Marcella.

‘In five years more, dear, you will be approaching twenty-eight. Is there greater probability of your finding a man you can love in those five years than in the last?’

‘I might meet——’

‘And might not. Marcella, my love, it is awaiting this possible somebody that makes old maids.’

‘I have seen no one I could love.’

‘Are you not fastidious, dear? Can you believe that in five years no man worthy of you has crossed your path? Are you not neglecting good opportunities, to conclude perhaps with an inconsiderate marriage, a miserable alliance made on the spur of a foolish moment?’

‘Heaven forbid!’ said the girl. She rose from her chair, and with thoughtful tread and drooping eyelids paced up and down the room. Once she stopped, and for the moment turning her eyes to her mother, said, with an

emphatic nod, 'I have thought of that,' which said, her walk to and fro went on. At last she came to a stop, with 'At any rate there is time enough for the present, is there not?'

'Time enough? Perhaps,' replied Mrs. Cassilys looking up and speaking doubtfully. 'You know yourself, dear, as well as I know you.'

Marcella made no answer. With her eyes fixed on the seat of the chair before her (she was leaning her hands on its back) she stood lost in thought. Then she moved, still saying nothing, to the window, and awhile looked out. After a time she left that too, and leaning her back against one of the book-shelves crossed her right ankle before the left, and resting the point of her shoe upon the floor, began with downcast eyes to trifle with her cuffs. At last she spoke, not looking up,

'I have always hoped to marry, mamma.'

'And I have always hoped it for you, dear.'

'And when married to love, and to be

loved, and then there is nothing I would not do for *him*, I cannot speak of it'—a hot flush crossed her cheeks—'But in the meantime I know I have never loved. You think me fastidious. I am. I have a right to be. It is only justice to myself. Not every man, even if he loved me, could make me happy, and for my happiness I *will* stake all. Do not think I do not know what I wish. I have well thought of it, and sometimes lost heart a little, that such men are hard to find.'

'Not hard, dear, perhaps impossible.'

'I hope not, I trust not,' she was still toying with her cuffs; 'I should like the man I loved'—she hesitated a moment and then went on—'to be in some things like me, unlike in many more, that we might have some thoughts in common and others to barter with each other: stronger than I, to protect me, more passionate to need me: cleverer to lead me: neither too kind and patient, nor rough and thoughtless of my needs: and, above all

things, just. I would wish him ambitious, though I have read such men love less. That wit, handsomeness, and address have no charms for me, I do not pretend. I need not say that he must be a gentleman, that, and some other things, are matters of course : not a noble, I am not sufficiently well born to mate equally with him, nor a man whose fortune is excessively unequal to my own.'

She had more easily got through the latter than the earlier part of what she said, and now concluded, 'I have thought, you see. Do I expect too much?'

'You expect much, dear.'

'There are such men.'

'Undoubtedly, but you have not all mankind to choose from, but only the very limited number of men you may chance to meet who are inclined to marry you.'

That was true, and, though evident, to Marcella new, and so a little time passed before she replied.

‘Were I to meet some such man,’ she said dropping her eyes, ‘and he to care for me, all I am would soon be his; and if I were already married’—there was trouble in her voice—‘married to some one, whose was neither my imagination nor my love, mamma, what then?’

‘Hush, my dear.’

‘Can you counsel me to risk it?’

‘No.’ It was a negative of the blunt, baffled sort to which Mrs. Cassilys gave utterance.

Marcella looked up. ‘You are right,’ she said.

There was that in the simple words which made Mrs. Cassilys glance at the speaker’s face. The maiden’s eyes, now turned on the view from the window, were fixed in a far-off gaze, as if questioning, seeking, awaiting. An expression far from natural to her occupied her powerful features, passions *in posse*, scarcely awakening, an expectancy of something for want of which her nature was not entirely at rest. ‘I had more prudently left such fires to smoulder

undisturbed,' thought Mrs Cassilys. She leaned back, and with a little sense of regret bit the inner part of her lip. 'I meant to counsel her,' she thought again, 'and I have only confused her. The girl is beyond my strength. I have never before interfered with her instincts, and I will never do so again. They are just, and may serve her when I cannot.'

But Marcella with a smile came away from the bookshelf. 'Dear me,' she said, 'fancy my making my humble surrender to a man! Can you imagine it, mamma? But seriously, you have this morning said things worth thinking of. For which many thanks.' She bent over her mother and kissed her.

Mrs. Cassilys rose.

'Thoughtfully and gently, Marcella,' she said, lightly laying her fingers on the girl's shoulder, 'and you will not do amiss.'

'Not I, mamma, don't be afraid.'

'I am sure I don't know whether self-reliance is weakness or strength,' thought Mrs.

Cassilys, as she left the room, thankful to be able to dismiss the whole affair from her thought, ‘but what confidence the child has!’

Soon Florelle, secretly on the watch for Mrs. Cassilys’s departure, interrupted a solitude her cousin could have wished longer.

‘Was I right, Marcella?’ she asked with curiosity.

‘You were.’

‘Isn’t it horrid?’

‘I can’t say I enjoyed it.’

‘And whom have you orders to marry; Mr. Rintearn?’

‘No.’

‘Ah, then it is F. D. G. K. K. Hammerbratsch. He has the most money, and so the burthen of the song is, “Keep your heart whole for F. D. G. K. K. H.”’ She had seated herself at her ease in an immense arm-chair, and as she spoke designed in the air, with a flourish of her hand, the letters she named.

‘You are again wrong.’

‘Oh, Marcella! It’s not Charley, is it?’ exclaimed Florelle, jumping from her seat with pleasure, and running across to where her cousin sat, where she knelt on the floor and looked up into her face, saying, ‘And we shall be sisters. I have so often thought of that.’

‘No,’ a little coldly.

‘Somebody else! Aunty has found a new “big fish,” to quote papa. Or is it something about Mr. Laurier?’

‘Why should it be anything about Mr. Laurier?’

‘Because you are the only girl he cares to speak to.’

‘I have not noticed it.’

‘Then other people have,’ remarked Florelle, with a little important nod of her pretty head.

‘Marcella, you are nasty,’ she went on as she rose from her knees, ‘you might as well tell about whom it is.’

‘It is not about any one except myself.’

‘Aunty has talked matrimony to you without specifying some man?’

‘Why not?’

‘Your mother, Marcella, must be a very remarkable woman.’

‘I believe she is.’

‘I wish she was my mother,’ said Florelle, musingly ; then she added quickly, ‘No, I don’t mean that, Marcella. No, no. I love mamma very, very much. I am sorry I said that. You won’t remember it, will you?’

‘I cannot undertake for certain to forget it,’ replied Marcella laughing, ‘but I won’t try to remember it.’

‘Thanks, Marcella. Lucy and I are going to play lawn-tennis at the Rectory, will you come too?’

‘Yes,’ said Marcella, rising quickly, ‘that is capital. Come along, Flo, let us make haste.’

The rector’s daughters played well, and they had several good games, on the neat lawn before the old-fashioned rectory windows,

but her mother's words pressed upon Marcella's thoughts.

In the afternoon she went out to walk alone.

It was in a little beech dell, on the edge of the rising ground behind the house. Trees have their influences, and thought, like sunshine, takes differing shades beneath tall, grey-trunked beeches, sturdy oaks, or resinous-scented pines. To think much among trees is not good, and Marcella's counsel with herself became sombre and sad.

The thesis she had to ponder was itself too serious for a nature with which the happiness of its own existence had grown to a kind of creed.

So disappointed a *dénouement* as to fade unloved !

It had never crossed the field of her vision, and oppressed her with all the exaggerated force of the sudden and unexpected.

Pacing, beneath the shady trees, the leaf-strewn ground, here patched with a little thin

grass, and there spattered with sunshine, with her sunshade dashing the loose dry leaves to the right and left, she counted the girls her compeers, the stream of whose life had flown parallel with hers, whose first season had been also her own, who were now married or engaged. There could be no doubt: she numbered among the exceptions.

Why? Because she had found it easier to be loved than to love.

There passed before her memory the men who had sought her. More than one was now married. Among them was not one to whom her heart did not instinctively close when she asked herself, ' Could I have wedded with him ? '

Yet of them she had liked many, and wished, though not had, them for friends. But with her familiarity always stopped there.

To marry, then, a man she did not love, rather than be left by all? It must come to that with more girls than she had been wont to suppose.

Or worse still, in the future to regret too hasty refusals!

Marcella came to a standstill. 'This is intolerable,' she said aloud.

Her eyes swept around the beauty of the scene, the present solitude, the stillness, the rare lights, and slumbrous darkness, the forms of monarch trees, and the slow fluttering of leaves that fell noiselessly to the ground.

Her nostrils drew a long breath of the fresh, tree-scented, shaded air, and turning from the path, and her thoughts, she seated herself by one of the trees on the moss-carpeted ground.

For what does it profit to fret with the future, when the present is decked in beauty and peace? If *he* will seek her, she is here under the beeches, waiting, half wishing that he would come, and able for him to become, royal, angelic, divine. If not, she scorns to bestow what she is on any one else. But the shades and lights are grateful and soft, sweet

sounds and pleasant scents many, and sights to delight the eyes ; and the whole wide world is filled with pleasure and fancy passing imagination that no mind can compass, and no life can exhaust.

CHAPTER X.

BUT a day or two later, it was a Sunday, chance, or contrivance, brought to pass an incident (destined to hasten such consequences as ensued) in which Marcella's behaviour will be judged to have proceeded from impulses different from those last recorded to have passed in her, from a mere desire to please her mother, from simple carelessness, or from other motives, more remote, according to the estimate formed of her character.

Rintearn's cause in the interim had been faring miserably. The profound fascination the handsome, voluptuous girl exercised over the very springs of his existence, as he now constantly day after day came into contact with her, grew to a frenzy, whilst she, with the

savoir faire of a woman often made love to, of a coquette practised in every drawing-room art, was unrelentingly holding him off. Meanwhile, her way with all the other men, simply and tastefully agreeable, formed an unkind contrast that made him, against his own reason, grudge them the mere accident of her acquaintance.

He wanted her, to have, to hold, to appropriate, to keep at his own side, to take away from the other men, to have rights over, to own.

If he could get her, take her, buy her, steal her, put strong arms about her and compel her to follow him, obtain her, he did not much care how, provided only he had her, he could rest. But to be kept at a distance whilst he was with her, to see her, to address her, to sleep under the same roof with her, and all the time to be made to feel she chose not that he should have any part in her, was maddening.

It was a sunny day, unwontedly calm. In the afternoon Mrs. Cassilys had gone with Marcella to sit in the flower-garden.

At one extremity of this garden was constructed a semicircular nook, surrounded by stone walls, some twelve feet high, with seats of the same material below, and a pavement of flagstones, raised above the turf, and running round beneath the seats. The whole was a survival of a style of landscape gardening more classical than that which at present prevails. A niche with a semicircular recess broke the centre of the wall, and in it a naiad, who had felt the severity of the northern climate, presided over the flow, from a vase at her side, of a clear stream of water. The naiad and her amphora had been boldly conceived, and though time had been rude to both, still produced a good effect. The clear water, which fell lightly splashing, first filled a basin, from whence overflowing it sped under the flags and turf, afterwards to reappear dividing in a straight course the whole length of the garden. Chance had planted a chestnut near the edge of the high ground above the wall, which its roots had in

one place caused to bulge, and the protruding boughs cast a shade on the seats and grass on one side, and, at times, on the naiad and her niche, making, with the aid of creeping plants that hung down from the summit of the ruddy sandstone walls, a pleasant and picturesque spot.

On the shaded turf, near the stone seats, were several garden chairs. Two of them Mrs. Cassilys and her daughter occupied.

‘What a delightful place this Wyvenhome is,’ Marcella was saying; ‘I can scarcely imagine spots or scenes more charming than there are here.’

‘I wonder who will in the end have Wyvenhome?’ replied Mrs. Cassilys.

‘That scamp Ned, I suppose. What a pity so pretty a place should be the heritage of a good-for-nothing!’

‘Hush, Marcella. Walls have ears.’

‘Mamma, why is so great a mystery made about Ned?’

‘Don’t wish to know, Marcella.’

‘One might really suppose him a myth,’ observed Marcella, ‘no one ever sees him. Charley, I presume, is aware of his existence, but he never alludes to it. Flo, if she does remember him, which I doubt, must imagine him dead. Yet, one of these days, he will appear, like the proverbial bad penny, and claim Wyvenhome.’

‘Never, Marcella.’

‘His heir, then?’

‘Ah, that is another thing. His heir may come, and may not. Charley may inherit the estate, and may not. I cannot tell who will.’

On the terrace in front of the house Rintearn, who was about to take a walk with Mr. Curteis and Laurier, awaited their coming to join him. Mrs. Curteis was near busying herself with a little table on which Marcella and Flo had, after luncheon, been eating fruit in the sunshine.

‘My poor niece,’ observed Mrs. Curteis

pathetically, 'she is a *gourmande*, but, after those terrible escapades at Folkestone, it is a comfort to me to see her enjoy any simple and harmless thing. You know she had, poor girl, to leave quite abruptly at last. It was a dreadful business.'

'Yes. I heard something about it,' replied Rintearn. He spoke in a tone to signify he wished to hear no more, and indefinitely in a way that might apply either in particular to Miss Cassilys's departure, or to her escapades in general; not with exact truth, but prompted by a desire to smother anything that might exist to be said against her.

'You heard something about it?' thought Mrs. Curteis. 'Then something was said.' She asked aloud, 'What did you hear?'

'Oh, not much; things one would not like to repeat; falsehoods I am sure,' replied Rintearn with annoyance.

'Ah, I fear not, Mr. Rintearn. I don't know really whether I am not to blame for

having her here with my girls. My poor niece ! I talk to you as to a friend, Mr. Rintearn, for I know you feel an interest in the girl. It is very sad she should have sunk to the mere voluptuary she is. But the temptations of some girls are very great. She has had no one to advise her. Her mother does not care, and we cannot well interfere. Poor Marcella !’

Mr. Curteis and Laurier issued from the dining-room window, and the three went on their way, towards the garden where Marcella was with her mother. In the shrubbery they overtook Flo going to join Mrs. Cassilys and her cousin, and she walked on with them.

‘Oh, here is uncle,’ exclaimed Marcella when they came in sight. As the party drew nearer she addressed Mr. Curteis, ‘Mamma and I are as idle as the wind that has not energy enough to stir a leaf ; we hope you have come to amuse us.’

‘How is that to be done?’ asked Mr. Curteis good-naturedly.

Florelle had sat down by Mrs. Cassilys, Laurier on the stone bench to look at a volume lying on it. Marcella, whose the book was, observed him, seeming not to observe. Rintearn and Mr. Curteis remained standing.

‘Mr. Rintearn might read to us,’ suggested Marcella.

‘With pleasure,’ he replied.

‘I had a book somewhere,’ next said Marcella, looking round at the bench. Laurier held out to her the volume in his hands, and she passed it to Rintearn.

‘“Émaux et Camées,” French poetry,’ observed Rintearn, turning some of the leaves. ‘I should have great pleasure in reading to you,’ he went on, ‘but French, and French poetry too, I fear I must decline.’

And he gave back the book to Marcella with a look of disappointment, if it was not one of annoyance.

‘Then, will Mr. Laurier read to us?’ asked Marcella, now turning to him.

‘I think I am to have the pleasure of a walk to Stollards with Mr. Curteis,’ replied Laurier.

‘Oh, but papa can very well wait whilst you read to us for a little while,’ said Flo. ‘Stollards is not very far.’

‘Yes, read, Mr. Laurier,’ said Mr. Curteis, taking a cigar from his case and offering one to Rintearn, who refused.

Then he sat down on the grass by his daughter, and Rintearn similarly placed himself a little distance from Marcella.

‘Am I to begin at the beginning or to choose a piece?’ asked Laurier, taking the book.

‘Wait, I’ll choose,’ replied Marcella.

She left her seat and came to his side on the stone bench, and after a brief glance at the index, and another at one or two pieces in the book, made her selection ; saying, as she returned it to him,

‘This, “*Affinités secrètes.*” ’

She looked behind her to see if she could lean against the stone wall without soiling her dress, and assured she could, instead of returning to her seat remained, whilst he read, at Laurier’s side, leaning back in a position that permitted her to look, when she chose, in his face.

Laurier read exquisitely, both as respected his French pronunciation, and the feeling the words demanded. As he ceased, expressions of gratification of more sincerity than is on such occasions common rose from every one of the party.

Meanwhile he closed the book and gave it back to Miss Cassilys.

‘I don’t think I shall let you go with Mr. Curteis,’ she said, looking in his face as she slowly took back the volume; ‘couldn’t you be persuaded to stay and read to us?’

‘I will only suggest that Flo shall go to the library for Victor Hugo, in lieu of Théophile Gautier,’ said Mr. Curteis.

‘That is a censure on my taste, uncle,’ returned Marcella quickly. ‘I appeal against it. Mr. Rintearn, was not that a pretty poem?’

‘I can’t say I saw much in it, so far as I understood it at all,’ replied Rintearn.

Marcella wondered. Women with difficulty understand that some men in love have no tact.

She repeated her question to Laurier.

‘I am going to ask you, when you can spare the volume, to lend it to me. I should like to read the rest,’ he replied.

‘Take it now,’ she said, on the spot, giving him the book with a smile. ‘I hope you will like it. It is a favourite of mine.’

After all, there was no more reading. Perhaps a silent hint from Mrs. Cassilys to her brother-in-law occasioned that. Just as the men were going she said, ‘At least you must not leave us Mr. Rintearn,’ and Rintearn rapidly enough turned back, and remained.

Laurier had taken 'Émaux et Camées' with him. 'Now we have no book,' said Mrs. Cassilys.

'Shall I go and fetch one, aunty?' asked Florelle.

What it should be was discussed, and then she rose to go.

'I think I will come with you,' said Mrs. Cassilys, 'if Mr. Rintearn will promise not to let Marcella get into mischief.'

Marcella glanced at her mother, and understood her departure was intentional.

'I'll try to be good,' she said, smiling, and added with a certain degree of signification, 'If Mr. Rintearn does not teaze me.'

'How beautifully Mr. Laurier reads,' said Marcella, as soon as they were alone, 'I suppose he is very clever. Everybody says so. My uncle has taken an immense liking to him.'

'And, do you know, Miss Cassilys, so have I,' said Rintearn, 'and the more because I at first disliked him—well, you know it—ex-

tremely. But since we have been here together he has got hold of me, and little things that pass every day prove to me that I have made a great mistake.'

'It is generous of you to acknowledge it, and I am glad you and I have come to agree about him.'

What pleasant words from the lips of a woman beloved.

'I wish he were different in some things,' observed Rintearn; 'his is a very rigid character, I am not quite sure that I understand him.'

Marcella made no reply.

Mrs. Cassilys and Florelle never came back, and all that long, stilly afternoon, whilst the water tinkled silver music in the air laden with perfume of late flowers, Rintearn was alone with Marcella; filled with the sense of her condescension; on the grass near the feet he adored; now in pleasant converse drinking in the melody of her moving voice, now in silence almost sweeter looking up into her liquid eyes, and

the face that was for him loveliness ineffable ; thrilled through and through by the strong spell of her presence ; persuading himself to believe her staying meant she was beginning at last to unclothe her maiden heart, and for him.

Many things she said might have taught him otherwise, but what recked he, if he might be near her ; hope, and her presence, that unspeakable thing, outweighed all the rest.

In the midst of such fruition unexpectedly appeared on the scene a little fellow between nine and ten, Mr. Curteis's youngest son. He marched straight up to them, and stopping short in front of Marcella, putting one hand behind his back, said, with an air of childish importance,

‘Cousin Marcella !’

‘Well, Tommy, where have you come from ?’

‘I want to speak to you.’

‘Here I am.’

‘No. I want to speak to you alone, about something very particular.’

‘What is it, Tommy my man?’ asked Rintearn.

‘I want to speak to Cousin Marcella, and I wish you would go away.’

‘Tommy, I am shocked at you,’ said Marcella, ‘that is very rude.’

But the little fellow persisted he wished to speak to her alone. At last, seeing Rintearn was not to be dislodged, he said,

‘Then if Mr. Rintearn won’t go away I shall say it all the same. I don’t like you to talk to gentlemen, cousin Marcella.’

‘Why not, Tommy?’ asked Marcella smiling.

‘Because I am going to marry you when I am old enough, and I don’t wish you to talk to gentlemen.’

Marcella drew the child to her knee and said, ‘Yes, that was arranged long ago, was it not, that you are to marry me when you are as

old as I am. But do you think that time will ever come, Tommy?'

'By-and-by. Then you will marry me, won't you?'

Marcella was laughing, the child full of childhood's earnestness, Rintearn watching with interest as he lay on the grass.

'You must give me lots of presents,' said Marcella.

'Oh, yes, what shall I give you?'

'I shall want horses.'

'I'll give you my pony.'

'And carriages.'

'I'll ask papa for one.'

'And plenty of fun.'

'I'll play with you.'

'And dresses?'

'I'll buy you some.'

'And money to spend.'

'You can't have the money and the dresses too, because—but perhaps papa will give me more money.'

‘ And I shall want diamonds.

‘ What are they ? ’ asked the child.

‘ You must ask Flo, she knows.’

‘ Does she ? ’ said Tommy, earnestly looking into her face, ‘ I’ll go and ask her.’

‘ Yes, and make haste. I think if you don’t take care we shall never get married after all.’

Tommy went a few steps, and then returned.

‘ Mr. Rintearn,’ he said, ‘ I’ll let Cousin Marcella talk to you now, but you must not ask her to marry you, because I sha’n’t let her.’

Then he walked away, beginning to run before he had taken ten steps, and finally scampering out of sight as fast as he could.

Rintearn looked at Marcella. Her regard was averted, and fixed on the ground. But whilst he watched she turned it towards him, and their eyes met, his inquiring, hers chilly, forbidding, distrustful.

It was no moment for what he most desired to say to her. The thing next uppermost in his mind took its place.

‘Horses, carriages, dresses, diamonds, money, play! Those are not the things for which you once thought a woman should live, Miss Cassilys; when, for instance, you and I discussed life in the vineyard at Cannes. Do you remember it?’

‘Perfectly,’ she answered, with a smile, pleased to discover her warning look had had its desired effect. ‘Yes, I indulged in some dangerous doubts in those days; since, I have happily changed my views, and seen my way to believing the truth of what I was taught, before I began to think for myself.’

‘That is the love of frivolity?’

His voice had a tone of reproof, but its sincerity forbade any suspicion of impertinence.

‘The love of pleasure.’

‘A hedonist. Is not that an ugly thing to say of a woman, Miss Cassilys?’

‘Is it?’ she asked meaninglessly.

‘The end of such a life?’

‘When I get to the end, if you will come

to 'see me I will tell you,' was the playful reply.

He looked at her wistfully, with the eyes of a man who has a great fear. To him it appeared to matter nothing to herself what became of her so that she had her fling. To warn her whither her reckless way might lead, nobody, save himself, seemed to care. Him hateful etiquette forbade to speak. And as he pondered it, looking up at her loveliness and beauty, his heart was wrung for her.

Unexpectedly she gave him the opportunity he wished.

'What,' she asked in a more thoughtful tone, 'should you surmise to be the end of such a life, Mr. Rintearn?'

He hesitated a moment whether he dared say what he did think, and then replied bluntly,

'Alcoholism.'

A faint colour rose on Marcella's cheeks, and she said quickly, 'You are definite, certainly.' Then her voice changed to her

brighter tone. 'Come,' she said, 'don't let us talk of that, we shall never agree, and shall do more wisely to find some pleasanter subject of conversation.'

So they spoke of indifferent things, till the shadows began to grow long, and Marcella said it was time to return to the house.

So ended what were the happiest hours of a man's life.

Little was said on the short way to the house. Both, perhaps, had too much to ponder.

That same evening Rintearn destroyed what little chance there was, if chance there was any, that he might persuade Miss Cassilys to hear him.

It happened in a simple way.

He was talking with Mr. Curteis, amid the buzz of voices, in the brilliantly lighted drawing-room, as they stood near a little table on which Marcella and Flo were pouring out tea and coffee.

'Do you, Mr. Rintearn,' asked Mr. Curteis,

‘know who this Miss Farnby is, whom Lord —— has married?’

‘No,’ replied Rintearn, ‘nor does any one else. She is some nobody he met at a ball in the country. They say she had money, but it cannot have been much ; and he is too wealthy to have regarded it. The whole affair is rather inexplicable.’

‘I heard it was considered an odd match,’ observed Mr. Curteis.

Marcella glanced round at the speakers, who with their backs to her stood behind her. Rintearn was stirring his coffee.

‘Some day you will be Lord Langley,’ she thought, ‘and a girl, who is a nobody, whom you met at a ball at Cannes, and who has a little money, declines the honour of doing something inexplicable, and having her marriage reported an odd affair.’

In the course of the evening Laurier brought her back her book, and expressed the pleasure he had derived from its perusal.

‘It is unreal,’ he said, ‘but then it is French.’

She forgave him the criticism she had not forgiven Rintearn.

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘it is the Germans who see beauty, the French content themselves with inventing it, but they invent very prettily do they not? And now,’ she went on coquettishly, ‘after lending you my book, I have perhaps a little claim to be permitted to ask a question. Is it true you last night said in the smoking-room, that “women are a criminal class,” and do you not think you owe an apology for it to every woman living?’

‘I should not have said any such a thing in the presence of a lady,’ he replied with a little smile that seemed to indicate amusement at his *mot* having been repeated; ‘if some man has repeated smoking-room talk he is to blame not I.’

‘Not if you think it. Only,’ she looked down, ‘I doubt if you do.’

‘Why, Miss Cassilys?’

‘ You look just, Mr. Laurier.’

‘ I hope I am just,’ he answered with a kind of reserve.

She was pleased with that, and looked up in his face whilst she rejoined,

‘ I hope you are too, and I am sure you try to be. But, then, why should you say a thing of this sort ? ’

‘ In all probability to reawaken to his senses and some conversation some man drowsy with tobacco.’

‘ No, that is not a fair answer,’ protested Marcella ; ‘ will you not tell me what leads you to that opinion ? ’

He was not much interested to continue the conversation, but seeing her awaiting his answer he said, ‘ Is it not a fact that women will do anything to gain admiration ? ’

She paused before replying, and then, in a thoughtful way that showed some concern to understand, and to be understood by him, said, ‘ Much, perhaps ; not anything ; often, too much.

But should you not make some allowance for our instinctive desire to please? It is not a base instinct, and in the case of instincts you will allow evil must be accepted with good.'

'Only that part of humanity is better which is exempt from instincts so perilous,' he replied dryly.

'Men? Are you without them? Was a man who knew himself utterly condemned ever good for much?'

'Many.'

She gave him a look of her handsome, dark-grey eyes that shamed him a little with a sense of being guilty of special pleading, while she was trying only to speak the truth.

'Let us concede that,' she now said, 'you are stronger than we, and in many things we look to you for help. Is it generous to think of us as you do?'

'You have shifted the ground of your argument, Miss Cassilys,' he observed, 'generosity is not justice.'

‘Then let us return to a question of justice.’ He smiled and she noticed it. ‘No: you will think that, like a woman, I am contending only for the last word of an argument. I acknowledge myself beaten. Now: you think thus of poor us. Would it be good for us too to think so of ourselves?’

The question took her hearer by surprise. At the instant he was not prepared with a reply.

‘Well, Mr. Laurier?’ insisted Marcella.

‘You ask a puzzling question.’

‘Is it not? Because not to believe oneself capable of behaving well must be so ruinous. But if your truth about us is not true to ourselves?’

‘Perhaps, Miss Cassilys, women are not able to bear the knowledge of truth. I must tell you I incline to think they are not.’

She turned to him a look, half wonder, half disquietude. It was a little time before she spoke.

‘How dreadful a thought! Unable to bear the truth. How you should pity us if your nature contains any justice at all!’ An idea struck her, and she went on more quickly, ‘But, do you really mean you can conceive of any human being living more securely, and more wisely, with only misapprehensions to guide her instead of truths?’

Laurier shook his head with a laugh. ‘This time you have beaten me,’ he said.

‘But why do you laugh?’

‘Because you want to convince me, Miss Cassilys; you know, “Bouche de femme paroles perdues.”’

‘Then let us change the subject,’ said Marcella not without pride.

When she left him, it was before long, he looked after her. ‘These unaccountable women,’ he thought, ‘a man really ought to be prepared for anything from any one of them. Who would have supposed Miss Cassilys could take things “au grand sérieux”?’

After the party had broken up that night Marcella entered her mother's room as the latter was undressing.

‘Well?’ asked Mrs. Cassilys.

‘That is finished—for ever.’

‘You have refused Mr. Rintearn?’

‘Not this time’—Mrs. Cassilys looked up with a start, but her daughter, who had not perceived it, went on—‘because he has not asked me.’ She proceeded to relate what she had overheard in the drawing-room.

Mrs. Cassilys made no attempt to gainsay the significance of the incident. When the girl was gone she said to herself, ‘This is the first and last time I interfere in Marcella’s love affairs.’

As for Marcella herself she lay her luxurious head on the pillow with a dim sense of disappointment. That had no relation to Rintearn, but to Laurier. Ignorant of any reason for the feeling, somehow she was displeased to find that, after all, he was nothing more than the

contemptuous character she had heard him represented.

Why did it always happen that a man, however attractive at first sight, in a few days disappointed her?

Was the cause that which some inner mentor at odd moments suggested, that the love of pleasure saps all the stronger emotions of the heart?

We know how we act, but why we act we only conjecture. Sometimes Marcella's thought replied a stout 'No' to that inner voice, sometimes only, 'I do not know.'

CHAPTER XI.

SEPTEMBER drew towards its close, and Keppel came down to Wyvenhome. Shooting pheasants at his leisure was more the character of sport he affected than trudging after grouse.

So Mrs. Curteis's party was at length complete.

And now began to appear, slowly, and at first faintly, bodings of something on the tapis at Wyvenhome more serious than sport.

Laurier and Keppel thrown together began to find strong affinities in their temperaments, and rapidly contracted a marked intimacy.

It was the more remarkable because Keppel seldom got on with a new acquaintance. He never himself commenced advances, and, though it was not his way to repel them,

his manner had a dead calm dissuading approach.

He spoke very plainly with Laurier of Rintearn.

‘That poor devil Rintearn. It is a bad business about him and this Miss Cassilys. He appears to me bewitched. Respecting other things, you will go far to find a better, more admirable fellow than Jack Rintearn, only about his own will he is a savage. Respecting Miss Cassilys he has it fixed in his head that he will marry her, and as neither facts nor persuasion have any power to turn him, I believe, in the end, he *will* marry her. She has refused him, I suppose, nearly a dozen times. It is palpable to every one, himself excepted, that the girl—she is a great fool, you see—simply does not like him. We have tried all methods of reasoning, coaxing, contriving, and ridiculing, that human ingenuity can invent—all simple labour lost. He’ll stand chaff with tolerable good nature, but thwarted he

won't be. If that is attempted he shows, at once, that from his bent he is not to be turned, and his bent is, he will have Miss Cassilys. If a syllable is breathed against her, or he suspects the insinuation only of any such thing, he is on the spot in an uncivilised rage. In fact he has become so sensitive about the whole affair, owing, it may be, to his continued ill luck, that it is almost equivalent to broaching a quarrel with him to approach it. Sometimes he does not see this Miss Cassilys for months, and nothing is heard about his insanity, till, just as his mother and friends are beginning to hope the lady's image is commencing to fade from Jack's memory, he lets fall three words to the effect, he intends to *marry Miss Cassilys*. Then she again crosses his path, as now, and he with dogged intent recommences the siege of her affections. Now, before he leaves, he will again propose, and probably be refused. I feel much for his mother, an old friend of mine. He might have made excellent matches,

but, not he! Chance 'upon chance is thrown away whilst he courts Miss Cassilys. And who is Miss Cassilys?'

'I suppose these fast girls have some indescribable attraction for certain men,' remarked Laurier.

'You think her fast?' asked Keppel quickly and with interest.

'I think nothing about her. Her aunt tells some odd histories. That is all I know.'

Marcella's reputation of fastness did not appear to be any disqualification in Keppel's eyes, for he sought her society to a degree that occasioned remark; so much so that Mr. Curteis said to his wife,

'Should you not give Mrs. Cassilys a hint? Keppel is not the kind of man with whom I should wish a girl of my own to be growing very intimate.'

'For which reason his intimacy is exceptionally agreeable to your niece. If you think

otherwise, speak yourself to Mrs. Cassilys. You are more familiar with her than I.'

'I shall speak. She ought to be warned.'

But he did not speak.

Meanwhile his wife threw Marcella and Keppel together as much as possible.

What passed between the two was always of the same character, a kind of duel in which Keppel challenged and Marcella invariably came off worsted.

For example :

One morning she was in the drawing-room, standing before the tall mirror above a console table, studying which of two autumn roses looked the prettier in the bosom of her morning dress. Unable to decide she stood trying in turn one and the other, again and again taking them up and laying them down on the table before her.

Whilst this was going on Keppel entered.

For some minutes he watched her unseen. Then he moved so that she caught his

reflection in the mirror. A movement on her part showed him she had become conscious of his presence, and he observed,

‘Much culture breeds great indecision, Miss Cassilys.’

‘I don’t understand you,’ replied Marcella coldly.

‘It seemed to me that this little difficulty of the roses, is the key to a certain strange circumstance in Miss Cassilys’s history.’

‘Did it?’ replied Marcella, piqued in her curiosity, and unwilling to believe herself in any way self-betrayed. ‘Which circumstance? For I think you are mistaken.’

‘I meant only humbly to suggest a reason for Miss Cassilys being Miss Cassilys still.’

‘That is because Miss Cassilys chooses it,’ replied Marcella quietly but pointedly.

‘Oh, “because she chooses it,”’ repeated Keppel a little patronisingly, and with a laugh.

‘Now, what do you mean this time?’ asked Marcella, turning round directly to face him.

‘I mean, I think the day will come when you will know better,’ said Keppel, meeting her affronted look with a smile that was half grimace. ‘There are many things, Miss Cassilys, which we like to believe, that are nothing better than fancies, and that *we choose* is one of them. On such pretty imaginations it has ever been the pleasure of men to feed. It flatters their sublime faith in themselves. But it is not you nor I, but circumstances that choose. We submit. Why has nobody netted that poor butterfly who is beginning to find the world too cold to live in,’—he pointed through the window to a starveling butterfly, one of the last of her race for the year, fluttering about among the flowers on the terrace—‘Either no one has tried, or has not tried in the right way, to catch her. No one, Miss Cassilys, has yet offered you what your fancy has preferred to being—Miss Cassilys. That is a circumstance, is it not? And that is the real cause. Had some man offered it you? Circumstances again, Miss

Cassilys. "Les grimaces ne sont point nécessaires dans notre siècle." When somebody some day offers you something your imagination judges of more worth than your liberty I shall have the felicity of congratulating you. Whether he will win you with the fancy you are his one and only passion, or buy you with a little kindness shown at some crisis when you stand in need of much, or persuade you he is going to make you perpetually happy——'

'At least I know better than that,' said the girl recovering herself with a bright smile.

Her eyes, fixed upon him whilst he spoke, had gradually lost their spiritedness, and her look had grown heavy and pensive, but now there was a tone of half-defiance in the way she continued, 'And then one can always think and judge.'

'Think! Oh yes one can think,' replied Keppel catching up her serious tone, 'and if you persevere long enough, reason will lead you

all round a question till you arrive whence you set out—as with the roses.’

Marcella bit her lip.

‘But then what should one do?’ she asked doggedly.

‘Enjoy what comes and trouble yourself about nothing.’

‘“Enjoy what comes,” I understand that, but to enjoy one must be thoughtful, enjoyment does not come of itself.’

‘Disbelieve it, Miss Cassilys. “Die Gaben kommen von oben herab in ihren eignen Gestalten.” The haphazard first is as happy as the last, or as any other. And either rose will look as well on *you*. However, I must be going. Will you not give me the other one of those roses?’

She shook her head and he left her.

Marcella crossed the room, and, with an expression of impatience, threw the two roses into the fire.

‘Poor flowers,’ she mused as she saw them

burn. 'I have again lost my temper. I do loathe that man. He goads me to defend myself, and I always think I am going to baffle him, and in the end he never fails to silence me and to leave me a worse and weaker woman for what I have heard from his lips.'

She covered her face with her hands.

'It is odd,' she broke out, as she again removed them, and proceeded to leave the room, 'that no one should ever think I need a little help. Yet there are moments when I need it as bitterly as any one; moments when I feel I could throw up everything.'

It was the accent of a nature unaccustomed to fear, but disquieted in a consciousness of shadows cast upon her unhelped path, by no perceptible object, having no perceptible cause, but sensibly blotting the light of her own pleasant sunshine way.

None but she seemed to perceive it, but her own assurance of a something, a some-

thing with which her thought grappled in vain, was perfect.

Rintearn was plaguing her mercilessly. Confidence of success is inherent in some temperaments, and from such reason for it is not to be asked. That the circumstances demand hope suffices them : and the thing is on the instant at hand. Of such a nature was Rintearn. The assent of Marcella herself at this time could hardly have assured him more fully than his own determined opinion of his suit's success. That he had been before in a similar frame of thought and discovered himself mistaken counted for nothing. Frederick the Great remarked with justice that men learn nothing from the experience of others, and bitterly little from their own. At present Rintearn's courtship had assumed a confident, cavalier tone entirely superior to any iciness or indifference with which Marcella concerned herself to rebuff it.

This humour of his Mrs. Curteis seemed amused, sometimes to encourage, and sometimes to tease by dashing the hopes she had on another occasion flattered.

So one afternoon about this time, standing with him by the drawing-room window, she pointed his attention to a pony-carriage, coming along the drive, in which were Marcella and Florelle, the latter holding the reins, whilst her cousin leaned over the side of the carriage in converse with Tom Twisden, walking near.

‘I fear you have many rivals, Mr. Rintearn,’ quoth Mrs. Curteis.

‘None whom I fear,’ was the easy reply.

‘Ah, but you do not know my niece as I do, Mr. Rintearn. I can tell you exactly what sort of girl she is. She loves her pleasure, and she loves nothing else in the world. She is made thus,’—Mrs. Curteis extended a thin but well shaped left hand—‘any man who is pleasant, mark the word, may go with Marcella as far as this;’—Mrs. Curteis indicated the

second joint of her middle finger—‘a man she likes, may go so much further;’—she signified a point an eighth of an inch nearer her finger’s tip—‘To the end—nobody.’ But Rintearn denied the case could be so.

That same evening there was some dancing. During a quadrille, in which Marcella had Rintearn for partner, Keppel seated himself by Mrs. Curteis.

‘Is Jack Rintearn going after all to marry your niece, Mrs. Curteis?’ he asked.

‘Really! Mr. Keppel!’

‘My friend Lady Julia will be long forgiving you.’

‘Marcella, Mr. Keppel, is not of the stuff of which noblemen’s *wives* are made.’

‘You don’t mean?’ his accent said the rest.

‘You will see.’

‘So bad as that!’

‘Mr. Rintearn is a *passionné*, and does not know what he is doing. You misunderstand me.’

‘He is mad about this girl, and to secure her ready to sacrifice everything.’

‘I know all that. But you will see ; and soon.’

‘I cannot understand. Now, if he would be content to wait till she married——’

‘My dear Mr. Keppel !’—Mrs. Curteis held up her hands, and then tapped him on the shoulder—‘you know you are a very naughty man. I do assure you you quite misunderstand me.’

Keppel shortly went to talk to someone else. ‘If he does not say something to Mr. Rintearn,’ thought Mrs. Curteis, ‘he is not Hunt Keppel.’

Keppel did say something to Rintearn. That was the day following. A turn of one of the drives through the copse enabled him and Rintearn, a short distance in the rear of the others, to speak unobserved. Rintearn but a few minutes before had been taking in excellent part some banter about Marcella, and this afforded Keppel an opening.

‘Rintearn,’ he said, ‘things are going on rather rapidly between you and this Miss Cassilys.’

‘I hope so,’ replied Rintearn decidedly.

‘Are you clear what it all means?’

‘That Miss Cassilys will consent to be my wife, I believe.’

‘She is not the girl for you, Rintearn. Your mother won’t like it.’

‘If Miss Cassilys consents she will be my wife, and I believe now she will consent,’ replied Rintearn energetically.

Keppel stroked his moustache, and continued more cautiously than he had at first thought needful,

‘Your mother and I are old friends, Jack. Many interests have cemented our relations with each other, and common interests make firm friendships. You must take what I am about to say, as from one of Lady Julia’s oldest friends, and not lose your temper over it,’—he stopped in his walk to give

his words more emphasis—‘Jack—you go home.’

‘Go home! Why?’

‘Never mind “why,”’ replied Keppel striking his hand on Rintearn’s shoulder, ‘go home to Sritten Court, Jack; and go to-morrow.’

‘And leave Miss Cassilys at the very time she may be expecting me to make her an offer of marriage—an open slight—to a woman I have loved for years—a woman I—worship—probable, very!’ retorted Rintearn in phrases broken by the impetuosity of excitement.

‘Now, Jack, you are losing your temper,’ said Keppel soothingly. ‘Is Miss Cassilys expecting you to propose to her? Are you sure of that? I am not. Does she mean to accept you if you propose? Are you sure of that? I am not. Or, plainly, what is it that is going on here just at present? Do you know? I tell you frankly I don’t. I am sure only of one thing. Mrs. Curteis does not wish her

niece to marry. Why then has she brought you down here and thrown you two together? Do you know the meaning of all those Folkestone stories?——'

'Lies,' interrupted Rintearn.

'Very likely. But when people lie they have a purpose. Do you know what the purpose was? I can only guess. I suppose, however, you do not wish to find yourself implicated in some mess with Miss Cassilys and her reputation?'

'If you mean——' began Rintearn hotly.

'I mean nothing, my dear fellow, for I understand nothing. Only, if you will take my advice—go home.'

They walked some steps in silence.

'In fact,' observed Rintearn bitterly, 'you are all intent on one purpose, to keep me from this girl, because I love her.'

'Jack, it is useless to talk romance to me.'

'I tell you though I *do* love her.'

'Nobody doubts it. You are not the first

man of thirty who has been stark mad for a woman. Be mad. It is a pleasant sort of lunacy. Make her as mad as yourself, madder, women are capable of it——’

‘I will not hear this, Mr. Keppel,’ broke in Rintearn.

‘Very well then—only, go away from here, that is all.’

The shooting party took luncheon that morning on the edge of the beech wood, where a small clearing, made the previous autumn, gave them the stumps for tables beneath the reach of the purple shadows of the trees. Within three minutes from their arrival the quiet spot, with its foreground of sunshine and rear of dark woods, occupied before by but two or three servants, waiting by unopened hampers, was transformed to a busy spectacle of feasting men, and of waiting menials hurrying to and fro, with hounds on the ground with their heads between their paws, game laid in order to cool, guns propped

against the trees, corks popping, clattering of plates and knives, and tongues and laughter rattling.

Keppel, Rintearn, Charley, Laurier, and one of the Twisdens had one large beech stump for a table. Twisden dividing a pie made some allusion to Marcella, prompted by nothing more than this, that the pie was of a kind she liked, and the recollection of a handsome girl comes easily into the brain of a man.

‘Ah, yes,’ remarked Keppel, ‘our fair, pleasure-loving friend knows what is good to eat. Do you know whether she affects Arcadian delights, pie and Bass “sub tegmine fagi,” whilst a recumbent devil, with his tail twisted round his waist, makes music on a pan-pipe, or is that insufficiently luxurious for a confessed hedonist?’

‘Who is a confessed hedonist?’ asked Laurier drawing a cork.

‘Miss Cassilys, did you not know it?’

‘How should I know it?’

‘And what is a hedonist?’ asked Twisden, holding out his glass towards the bottle Laurier had uncorked.

‘An animal that goes in for enjoyment regardless of the consequences,’ replied Keppel.

‘I think that is rather rough on my cousin, Mr. Keppel,’ objected Charley.

‘Don’t distress yourself, Curteis,’ remarked Laurier, seating himself at Charley’s side, ‘such is the manner of women and other irrational animals, only with a distinction. The animals succeed in enjoying themselves, you may be sure of it, notwithstanding all philosophers have said to the contrary, but the women don’t.

“Wise wretch ! with pleasures too refin’d to please ;
With too much spirit to be e’er at ease ;
With too much quickness ever to be taught ;
With——”

His eye caught the expression of Rintearn, and he broke off, saying, ‘Give me some of that pie, Twisden.’

‘Don’t mind Rintearn, Mr. Laurier,’ interposed Keppel, who had observed what had passed, ‘he regards Miss Cassilys as a divine essence, beyond taint of all terrestrial comparisons and frailties.’

‘Well, Rintearn,’ observed Laurier, anxious in a good-natured way to make the *amende honorable*, ‘men in love must expect to be chaffed. You have the lady’s smiles you know to weigh against our jests.’

‘Does he? That is the question,’ remarked Keppel.

It was said so *sotto voce* that not all heard it. Rintearn did, however, and looked annoyed. Mr. Curteis soon after hailing him, from another part of the scene, he took the occasion to leave an unpleasant vicinity. Laurier and Keppel concluded their luncheon with Twisden and Charley alone, Keppel giving free flow to the expression of his sentiments concerning Rintearn and his love affairs.

‘All very fine, Mr. Keppel,’ retorted

Charley, 'but the antidote to woman is a medicine not yet discovered.'

'The antidote to woman is women,' replied Keppel.

'I doubt it,' remarked Laurier, 'that is only a multiplication of ills. There is no antidote. They are an unmanageable evil, and the only way to deal with them is not to believe a word they say, and to keep a sharp watch in which quarter their interest to deceive lies.'

'Laurier, you should never speak evil of women,' said Keppel reprovingly.

On their return to the house that evening Laurier and Keppel reached it before the rest. Entering the hall they found Florelle there with the rector's girls and Marcella. They had been playing on the lawn, and were putting away their rackets and balls. It is a moral obligation for girls in a house where shooting is going on to be pleasant about the sport, and the young ladies were not forgetful of their duty.

Laurier had made a bag better than usual. Whilst he was receiving the congratulations of Florelle, Keppel turned quickly to him, and said,

‘Miss Cassilys wishes to know, Mr. Laurier, how a man who has no eyes for a woman, contrives to be able to see a bird?’

‘Perhaps,’ suggested Laurier, ‘because a bird is the more unmistakable thing of the two.’

‘Only, Mr. Laurier, I said nothing of the sort,’ observed Marcella.

‘At least confess,’ rejoined Keppel, ‘that you said Mr. Laurier had no eyes for a woman.’

‘I never said any such thing,’ replied Marcella, ‘I could not have said it, for I have never thought it.’

A subtle movement of Laurier’s face, into a cast she had not seen it take before, attracted Florelle’s attention. He had been looking carelessly at Marcella whilst she replied to Keppel, but as the last words passed her lips his regard rapidly changed to one, slightly reserved,

of penetrating, absorbed examination, a look that meant search of every line in her features, as with the purpose of piercing into the substratum of her mind.

It was not a regard long in time, though it lasted some seconds after her speech was done, yet long enough to give Florelle time to think, 'I should not care to be looked at like that.'

Marcella did not perceive it. She had looked at Keppel whilst she spoke, and then dropped her eyes with a certain expression of annoyance and pride.

'And do you never say what you do not think?' asked Keppel, making a very obvious remark on what her words and even more her tone conveyed.

'The witness clearly implies she believes she does not,' answered Laurier for her.

It was Marcella's turn now to question his face. But that was impenetrable.

The other men came in, and so the incident

ended. Laurier put away his gun, and with a slow step mounted the broad oak stairs.

““I cannot have said it, *because I have never thought it,*”” he mused, ‘that is beyond comparison the most remarkable disclaimer I have ever heard. Its ingenuousness is simply confounding. By implication Miss Cassilys has never conceived of herself coining a deliberate falsehood. Was she conscious of a distinction between what she really thought and openly expressed, so naïve a retort would have been seen in all its ridiculousness. “I cannot have said it”: Why not? “Because I have never thought it.” An astounding reason to adduce; a claim to an intrinsic veracity. And she spoke as if she meant it in that sense, and as if she was speaking the truth. I think I can see when a woman is lying, and if she was I never saw a witness not guilty of perjury. What an impression that could be made to have on a jury. I should like to have that girl in a witness-box. I verily believe her evidence would prove

unassailable. I never heard a reply that conveyed to me so sharp an impression of a nature veracious to its core. And a woman, an ordinary, handsome, vain society girl, with a reputation for being fast! It baffles me.'

On one occasion Charley had, with much good sense, remarked on the ease with which a superficial observer of Laurier would in all probability, misapprehend the drift of his misprision of feminine character. It was, in fact, a thing in some respects as fine as other men's regard for the sex, and almost without a point of resemblance with the vulgarities of common contempt.

For instance, his theory of women's untruthfulness. Instinctive truthfulness, a thing many who aver honourable women truthful are fond of ascribing to them, he presumed a pure myth. Intrinsic truthfulness he accepted as a result, on a character tempered enough to bear it, of a sharply defined education. But the culture of women is so bizarre, the notions

they acquire so inaccurate, and their thought, which has helped to make their culture such, itself so prone to vagueness, that he deduced truthfulness among them to be as impossible as accurate description of the unknown. Let an objector reply, unwitting misrepresentation was not falsehood, Laurier returned, neither was the constant habit of it compatible with the mind's own consciousness of truthfulness to the utmost limit of its ability; and this he averred, surely with correctness, was the essence of a character intrinsically truthful.

Marcella Cassilys's words, 'I could not have said it, because I have never thought it,' did appear to him the very breath of this spirit of conscious truthfulness.

He made up his mind to study her? Not at all. She stood too entirely apart from him for the idea to enter his mind. She was simply a girl, whom some man was courting, staying at a house whither Laurier himself had come for shooting, leisure, and recreation.

If he was tempted to study any one it was Keppel.

Chance, however, discovers things beyond our aims

CHAPTER XII.

It was a soaking day. With long faces the men were doing their best to beguile the hours indoors, most of them succeeding very imperfectly.

Laurier had retired to the library, and found a comfortable chair and a book.

He had been thus engaged undisturbed for some hour and a half, when Miss Cassilys entered. A bow with a faint smile acknowledged his presence, and she proceeded towards the window. Laurier was just this much interested in her, that he looked to see what she was going to do, which would not have been the case had it been Florelle, or any of the other girls in the house. Then he continued looking, to see what she did. By approaches so slight

a man moves forward into the range of a woman's attraction.

Marcella stopped before a bookcase near the window, and began to search one of its upper shelves for a book. She stood a little way from it, her head slightly thrown back, her profile and her spirited figure in a closely-fitting princess robe sharply defined against the light of the window. 'She must have good eyes,' thought Laurier, 'to be able from where she stands to read the titles of the books on those shelves near the ceiling.'

The book was found, and Marcella turned to look for the library steps.

Laurier rose. 'Let me assist you,' he said. He brought the steps and took down the volume she indicated. A small shower of dust followed it.

'Wait a minute,' he said, taking his handkerchief and wiping the volume, 'this book is not fit to be touched.'

'Is it not shameful,' she replied, 'the state

of these poor books? But in this house nobody cares for books, and except when mamma and I come here I don't believe one of them leaves the shelves.'

Laurier descended the steps and gave the volume into her hand. She took it, lifting her eyes to his and saying, 'Thank you,' in her half gracious half artless way.

'You are fond of books?' he asked.

'Very.' She looked about her for a seat and chose one near. 'I have a beautiful library at home—not of railway novels'—she looked at him with a little curl in the corners of her lips—'and I spend quite half my spare time indoors in reading.'

'But you do not condescend to novels?' said Laurier.

He had at once accepted her sitting down for a hint she would like a chat, and himself took a chair a little distance from her's.

'I did not say that,' she answered, 'I enjoy

nothing more than some novels. But I like to read other books too.'

'What sort of books have you in your library?'

'Principally *belles lettres*. The library was papa's collection and he left it to me. It fills nearly half the first storey of our house in town.'

'You and Mrs. Cassilys live in town?'

'Yes, mamma and I live alone together (I have no brothers or sisters), and we lead, for women, you know'—another little grimace—
'a very happy life.'

'And do Mrs. and Miss Cassilys then both understand happiness in the same sense?'

'I know what you mean,' laughed Marcella, 'that as you think it impossible mamma and I should like the same things, we must sometimes squabble. Well, mamma and I are not altogether agreed as to what is pleasantest, but then, we are neither of us of the quarrelling kind, and so live together none the less happily.'

‘And in what respect do your ideas of what is pleasant and Mrs. Cassilys’s differ?’ asked Laurier. He was beginning to be interested.

‘I fear that would take long to explain. It amounts to something like this : Mamma prefers to take life lightly, and to enjoy herself if chance fall that way ; I to take life seriously, and to distil its pleasure out of every day.’

‘You call that taking life seriously?’

‘Is anything more serious than whether we are happy or not?’ she asked more earnestly.

‘You spoke a moment since of pleasure.’

‘That is the same thing, unless I am mistaken.’

‘Behold the woman,’ thought Laurier, ‘happiness is—pleasure.’ ‘That, Miss Cassilys, is a bold avowal,’ he said, ‘that pleasure and happiness appear to you the same. It reminds me that, a day or two since, I heard a very definite name given to your way of thinking.’

‘Mr. Rintearn told you I was a hedonist.’

‘That is the word : but Mr. Keppel used

it, not Mr. Rintearn. You allow it to pass unchallenged?'

She toyed some seconds with the volume in her hand, and then said brightly, 'I have no wish to be supposed a female philosopher, a creature with a crotchet, but, I suppose, we all think a little about our own lives and how to manage them, and I, thinking about mine, have learned to be persuaded that pleasure is pleasant, and a thing to be sought, and pain, painful, and to be shunned. If that is hedonism, I am a hedonist.'

'You think so?'

He fixed his keen look upon her, whilst his lips pressed themselves together.

A second, or more, she returned the regard with an uncertain look of her thoughtful, dark-grey eyes, then, leaning back in her chair, she said with some dignity, 'Why should you ask about my thoughts? You cannot have forgotten how few days have passed since I essayed thoughtful conversation with

you, Mr. Laurier, and merited only to be set aside. Shall we not find the rain, or the dust on these books topics more congenial ?’

She set on its edge on her knees the book she held, and folding her hands upon it, let her eyes fall on her fingers. It remained for Laurier to change the topic or to attempt with her persuasion to continue to speak of herself.

He chose the latter. The soft pensive picture she made, graceful, light robed, in the shaded library, decided him.

‘I asked,’ he said, and as he began she lifted her eyes, looking at him from under her brows, ‘because your view of life seems to me unusually definite, and also, because an accident has led me to think you careful to speak the truth to yourself.’

It was assuming a familiarity some degrees in advance of what subsisted between them, but the conversation had taken a turn that to some extent excused it.

Marcella did not immediately reply. ‘If

you care to know, then,' she said at last, 'that is my view of life. I am a hedonist.'

'But, perhaps,' observed Laurier in a hesitating way, as though seeking some outlet from a mental *cul-de-sac*, 'you and I understand that word differently. How would you define pleasure?'

'Ah, now you will be able to laugh at me,' she answered smiling, 'I cannot define it. I have an idea of what a definition is, but nothing like logic enough to frame one.'

For once, however, Laurier had lost some of his inclination to raillery. 'Never mind logic,' he said; 'tell me, if you will, simply what you understand by pleasure.'

'Enjoyment of things of the kinds one does enjoy, objects grateful to the eyes, melodious sounds, fragrant scents, pleasant things to eat and to drink and to wear, agreeable sensations: the sense of health, strength, wealth, security, position: the consciousness of being respected and loved: a taste for art, some acquaintance with

history and science : pleasurable emotions : the whole consciousness of ability to take pleasure and to please : and so forth. Pleasures are a somewhat large order to enumerate.'

'You find life so full of pleasures?'

'Full and running over.'

'No dull days and weeks?'

'No, I am never dull. Pain, and sorrow of course we all meet, but those are not dull. And under ordinary circumstances I enjoy every hour, and could enjoy it ten times over.'

'Miss Cassilys, you must have a brain of steel, and the health of an immortal.'

'I do enjoy splendid health,' she answered with a certain pride, 'but, then, I take much greater care of it than most girls do at my age.'

'Because it conduces to your pleasure?'

'Is not that a good reason?'

Laurier wondered, 'Was she really in earnest?' It seemed so. He now asked,

'But, Miss Cassilys, have you no apprehension of some collapse at last, induced

by this unlimited indulgence in an almost voluptuous life?’

‘Unlimited indulgence ! But my indulgence is *not* unlimited, Mr. Laurier. How could it be? Nature has in the first place set bounds I cannot go beyond, and am not so foolish as to attempt to go beyond. I am not a visionary who supposes that life can be made more pleasant than the conditions of life permit, but am very well aware all pleasures have limits quickly reached, and I can assure you I am not inclined to stake certain enjoyments I can reach by straining after others that are unattainable—’ she changed her position, easily, to one more picturesque even than before, and concluded—‘One understands little of how to enjoy life who does not know the art of pausing in time.’

Laurier looked in her thoughtful face, slightly animated by her interest in what she was saying. Certainly no girl was ever less *blasée* of look than she.

‘Your defence of hedonism is capital,’ he said, ‘but I think I am, with your permission, about to demolish the whole structure.’

‘You have my permission to do so, *if you can*. I have the courage of my opinions, you see.’

‘If the price of your pleasures be the pain and privation of others?’

‘Why of my pleasures more than of yours?’

‘The hedonist finds pleasure its own reward, and is constrained to be indifferent to what it may cost if he enjoys.’

‘Now, that is a monstrous assumption,’ replied Marcella quickly. ‘Why can a hedonist not be touched by another person’s pain? I know much is said of the selfishness of the votaries of pleasure, but I have not always found them so very selfish. There does exist a selfish class, cruelly selfish; those who wish to enjoy themselves and cannot, because they have never learned how, and I believe it is not

the pleasures but the cruel disappointments of these people's lives that make their strange insensibility. For the rest, if I reply that the consciousness of having caused another pain awakens in me emotions so acutely painful as to leave no sense free for enjoyment, it follows I shall shun giving pain more carefully even than suffering it.'

'It would follow. But will you contend that with persons accustomed to enjoy themselves that would be the case?'

'When are you most disposed to create enjoyment for others, when you are yourself happy or unhappy?'

'That is conclusive,' said Laurier.

He rose, and having walked to the window leaned his back against it, and looked down on the floor.

There was a long silence. Only the ceaseless rain pattered against the window, and splashed on the ground beneath.

Marcella leaned on one arm of her chair,

from time to time looking up slyly at the man's long reverie.

It was a triumph for her pride to have made him think.

‘I had no suspicion,’ he said at last, ‘how strong a case you would make.’

‘I happened, you see, to be defending the truth.’

He looked at her, and walked back to his seat. She was rather surprised at the impression she had produced. It was not, however, so much what she had said that had wrought it, as the manner of her speech, and an entirely new apprehension on his part of the fact that her own happy life was itself the living instance of her way of thinking.

‘If you are right, Miss Cassilys,’ he said a little seriously, ‘I have much misunderstood life. What led you to think thus?’

‘My father taught me to think in this way. But, Mr. Laurier, does any one *think* otherwise?’

‘Many, I should say.’

‘Do you not mean,’ she rejoined, leaning forward, ‘the many who never think, and the many more who do not choose to see at what they are really aiming? Surely, Mr. Laurier, the mark of all labour, learning, patience, and even voluntary pain, is pleasure. Call it happiness, but allow you cannot conceive of happiness in which there is no pleasure. Pleasure is the scope of all our efforts, the only reward ever offered, in this world, or, as they say, in the next, because the only one acceptable.’

She spoke softly, and without the least effort or semblance of pretension, in a way that gave what she said quiet, but incalculable force.

Again it was long ere he replied.

‘I suppose women have a natural inclination to become hedonists?’ he said at last.

‘All are born hedonists, and,’ she went on

with a smile, perhaps not quite free from a spice of mischief, ‘as we are less distracted with diversities of interests and enterprises than you are, it is natural, that unless our brains are fogged with words, we should keep our intuitions more clear.’

‘Oh, I don’t know that I can assent to that, Miss Cassilys,’ protested Laurier with a laugh. ‘However, will you pardon my strictures?’

‘I should like them, please.’

‘Your defence of hedonism, is the defence of your hedonism; and you will concede your circumstances are exceptional’—she nodded assent—‘and your character, perhaps, exceptional too.’

‘No, no, I deny that.’

‘Excuse me, but I think you are mistaken. Next, you have possibly read,—

“Sobald man spricht, beginnt man schon zu irren.”’

A moment her eyes dropped. Then she looked up, and said,

‘Thanks. I have felt that. And—you will make allowance for it, will you not?’

He was about to reply when the gong announced luncheon. ‘Already!’ exclaimed Marcella.

They walked into the dining-room to luncheon together.

Mrs. Curteis heard of what had happened and rallied Laurier on it.

‘So you have been discussing philosophy with my niece,’ she said.

‘Philosophy? Scarcely. But I must confess to having been struck with a vein of originality in Miss Cassilys. She improves on closer acquaintance.’

Mrs. Curteis shook her head with a laugh.

‘Ah my poor niece! She is very strange. You should have known her father. He was a little the bookworm, but you would have been enchanted with him. But Marcella, I fear, is a young person who regards every man that

does not admire her as a mistake, and one she never fails, on the earliest occasion, to set right. I can easily believe she has been exhibiting to you the picturesque side of her character. But, poor girl, she is so strange. She has been going on in a terrible way this year. It is not likely she has long to live. We do not like to thwart her. Her poor father died of a sad complaint. We hope Marcella does not inherit it. But you see how hectic a life hers is. A few years ago she might have been the belle of the London season. If you ask her mother, she will tell you, her health compelled her to give it up. Poor girl, it is very sad.'

'Very,' said Laurier. Did the woman think he could not see what a liar she was?

To Marcella Mrs. Curteis said,

'So now you have made friends with both of them, Mr. Laurier as well as Mr. Keppel.'

'Mr. Keppel is no friend of mine, aunty,

and I do not see why Mr. Laurier should be coupled with him,' replied the girl.

'No, you don't know much of life,' was the curt reply.

It fretted Marcella.

But in the evening Mrs. Curteis was led to conjecture her words had made but a trifling impression, for she caught a sight of her niece sitting in the shade, in silent consideration studying Laurier's face as he talked with another of the men. In the maiden's eyes lurked a look that told a *soupçon* of amity mingled with her curiosity. Mrs. Curteis softly came to her.

'Well, Marcella, and what do you think of your new favourite?' she asked so abruptly that the girl started.

But instead of replying she only dropped her eyes with a certain air of disdain.

Her aunt sat herself at her side.

'So this,' she said, 'really is the sort of man you like. I am interested at last to have discovered the truth.'

‘I do not know what sort of man Mr. Laurier is,’ replied Marcella, now put on her mettle, ‘only, I am disinclined to believe him what he has been described.’

‘What has he been described?’

‘As a man to women repelling and contemptuous, has he not?’

It was spoken in a tone that implied, ‘You know this quite as well as I.’

‘Are you going to convert him?’ sneered Mrs. Curteis.

‘I have other more amusing occupations,’ rejoined her niece.

But the words had their desired effect. Miss Cassilys’s was not a character that enjoyed the prospect of becoming an object of general observation, and she judged some circumspection respecting Laurier prudent.

So when the next day at luncheon Mrs. Curteis contrived that Marcella and Laurier should be side by side, the former was discouraging and cold. Laurier, desirous she

should see that her tone had his liking, and unskilled in women, gave himself more trouble than was needful to show her his meaning. But the pleasure with which she might, under other circumstances, have remarked it, was overbalanced by the distaste, felt by every girl of spirit, for seeming to cultivate the favour of a man.

At dinner time Florelle came into Marcella's room whilst she was dressing.

'Ma,' she said, 'has been trying to tease Mr. Rintearn about you and Mr. Laurier.'

'How did he take it?' asked the other with indifference.

'Quite unconcernedly. I am sure he thinks, Marcella, you are going to accept him.'

'It is very annoying.'

'Poor Mr. Rintearn,' said Flo, looking down with some pretty pity in her soft blue eyes, 'he does love you tremendously, Marcella, and you are awfully hard-hearted against him. If a man loved me like that, I think I

should love him *a little bit*. Don't you care the least bit for him, Marcella ?'

'Not the least. Why should I, Flo ?'

'Because he loves you so much.'

'Other men have done that.'

Flo regarded her cousin. How strange to be loved, and courted, and worshipped as Marcella was, and not to care ! What could Marcella want more ?

She was loved and worshipped beyond dispute ; and the worship, passionate as it was, was not without its gentler, more tender side, as there had been proof that day.

Playing, perhaps it should be more rightly called romping, with Tommy, Marcella had, by a sudden wrench, slightly strained her right arm, and to move it in certain directions gave her pain. Rintearn had come to know of it, as he came—it seemed by intuition—to know of almost all that respected her ; and she had had, in spite of herself, to feel the contrast between the complimentary sympathy of the

rest of the household, and the downright pain it could be plainly seen was to him the knowledge that she was in pain.

But in Marcella that only bred the thought, 'I do wish that man would not care so much about me.'

CHAPTER XIII.

CHARLEY went for two days to town, on business for his father.

Here it befel that he heard a certain piece of news. He was at Dougall's giving orders about some fowling-pieces, when a friend happening to enter, began some questions about the Wyvenhome party.

‘Your handsome cousin down there too is she? *Apropos* of her (by the way, I hear she has been going it rather fast at Folkestone this autumn), do you remember that man Hammerbratsch, who was running after her all last season? He is going to be married to a Miss Stryne, a girl he met at Folkestone.’

‘The deuce he is,’ said Charley, ‘you don’t mean Theo Stryne, a tall, dark girl?’

‘Yes. She is staying at Brighton now, and Hammerbratsch has gone down there to be with her.’

At the nearest newsvendor’s Charley bought a railway guide. It was too late to go down to Brighton that day, but the next morning found him, at the time most likely for his purpose, on the Brighton pier.

Some part of the information was certainly true, for amongst the first persons he observed were Hammerbratsch, and, walking with him, in a somewhat pronounced costume, Theo.

‘I must put a stop to this,’ thought Charley.

He walked up to them and shook hands.

‘Dear me, Mr. Curteis,’ exclaimed Theo, who had coloured, ‘who on earth would have thought of seeing you?’

‘At least not Miss Stryne, eh?’ rejoined Charley significantly.

Theo looked aside.

‘We have to thank you so much, Mr.

Curteis,' she said, now walking on, 'for those beautiful hampers of game you sent us. Fancy, Mr. Hammerbratsch, you know how particular papa is, and he says he never saw any birds so beautiful. He will be quite pleased to see you, Mr. Curteis. Is Marcella still at Wyvenhome?'

Thus she ran on for some time, till Hammerbratsch stopped to speak with a friend, and then she and Charley took a few steps alone together.

'I heard some strange news in London yesterday, Miss Stryne,' said Charley, immediately availing himself of the opportunity, though slight, 'that you were going to marry Mr. Hammerbratsch.—That is not true?'

'Why should it not be true, pray?'

'Why, Miss Stryne, are you not going to marry me?' asked Charley with all the air of real surprise.

Theo felt her heart leap, as not the most passionate proposal had ever made it do, but

she was a young lady of experience, and managed to smile, an incredulous, jesting smile.

‘Are you mad, Mr. Curteis,’ she asked, ‘or only very impudent?’

‘Neither. I am in earnest. Of course I know nothing was said about it, only I thought there was a kind of tacit understanding.’

‘Really,’ rejoined Theo, archly and still incredulously; ‘and, if you please, on what grounds did you form that opinion?’

‘Oh, we’ll waive the grounds. But, seriously, Miss Stryne, I should never have thought of plaguing you if this other man had not come in the way. Only, you know, you will have me, won’t you?’

Hammerbratsch returned too soon for any reply, and the conversation once more became a rattle of nothings, spiced with some very pointed compliments, on the part of Hammerbratsch, to Miss Stryne.

‘Oh, Mr. Hammerbratsch,’ said Theo

presently, 'there is papa. Do go and tell him—you don't mind my asking you, do you?'—this most persuasively—'do go and tell him Mr. Curteis is here. Don't let him go away till he has seen him.'

Hammerbratsch left them quickening his pace. Theo and Charley followed in the same direction, more slowly.

'Now,' quoth Charley, 'we recommence where we left off, and it is your turn to answer, Miss Stryne.'

'Certainly, Mr. Curteis,' rejoined Theo with spirit, 'you have an original method of courtship.'

'Well, and yours was an original method of making my acquaintance.'

'I fear I then made a great mistake,' she replied, for the first time speaking seriously.

'Don't say that till I have given you reason for it, Miss Stryne,' replied Charley, in a tone the same as her own. 'Now the time is short, we won't quarrel. One of these days you and I will be married, will we not?'

‘ You and I be married ! And why of all foolish things in the world should we do that ? ’

She put her pretty head a little on one side, and looked mischievously into his face.

‘ Because——’

Charley broke off. Hammerbratsch and Mr. Stryne were within a yard of his face.

Introductions ; thanks, on Mr. Stryne’s part most sincere ; general interchange of meaningless observations ; small talk ; a turn on the pier ; to walk four abreast impossible ; they pair off, Charley securing Theo ; the others a little distance in front.

‘ It is my turn to go on,’ said Charley. ‘ Why should we be married ? Because——. I can’t make compliments, nor talk sentiment, Miss Stryne. I could not easily speak of you as I think of you, and I do not wish you to think of me anything different from what you have seen. I suspect you have any amount of all that sort of thing from other men, and can do without it. You and I like each other. We

shall be very happy together. There are the best of reasons. If you will take me, I'll be as good to you as I can. So, yes, or no, Theo?'

But for reply he looked and listened in vain. She still walked by his side, step by step with him. Only her face was impenetrable and her lips speechless, and no gesture forthcoming to tell what she purposed to reply.

It was a hard fight for Theo. She had loved him for his open face and his gay, frank voice the first hour she saw him : and he had utterly vanquished her now by his dashing, abrupt declaration, with its daring repudiation of every art that is held needful to win a woman's assent, of all of which arts Theo was heartily nauseated. But to wed a man who had nothing ! She, the fast, the fashionable, the supercilious Miss Stryne to descend to love in a cottage, for an open face, and a manly voice ! To have to live on something, quite dreadfully inadequate, to dress goodness knew

how, and to give up quite too much more than any man had a right to expect !

‘It is really quite too awful to have to decide such things,’ thought Theo ; ‘I’m sure I don’t know what I shall say. He is a dear fellow, and I should doat on having him, if he had even only a little, but I don’t know how I can marry on quite nothing. I dare say he would earn anything I asked him, only I can’t possibly hint any such conditions. This is quite too dreadful. I don’t know what I shall say.’

And whilst Charley still waited it became possible again to walk four abreast, after which Theo cunningly kept out of his way. The only thing that passed between them was that when Mr. Stryne pressed him to return with them to luncheon, a sign from her instantly forbad his accepting.

At length they left the pier. Outside the entrance the party broke up.

Charley and Mr. Stryne shook hands with ‘So glad to have made your acquaintance ;’

Mr. Stryne and Hammerbratsch shook hands with simply 'Good-morning ;' Theo and Mr. Hammerbratsch shook hands with 'Au revoir ;' Mr. Hammerbratsch and Charley bowed. Then Charley held out his hand to Theo.

'Good-bye, Miss Stryne.'

She put her hand in his, and let it rest there, whilst her soft, dark eyes gazed straight into his.

Then instead of 'Good-bye,' she said—'Yes.'

'My darling,' whispered Charley, tightening his grasp of her hand.

An instant her fine fingers returned his pressure, then she snatched her hand away, and followed her father.

In the evening Charley received a letter at his hotel.

'DEAR CHARLEY,—

'I know you will not need more than a word from me.

'You know, Charley, if you do not take

care, we shall be *dreadfully* poor. I will love you, dear, but we can't eat love, nor buy clothes with it, and I *do* trust you, Charley, not to let your Theo want the things she ought to have.

‘You will understand we cannot often meet, and that you must not write to me, nor come to see me except *very* seldom, in a *quite* accidental way. And you must not mind my being a little *wee* bit of a flirt.

‘Yours very lovingly,

‘THEODORA STRYNE.’

‘I wish I had some of the money that has been thrown away by my scamp of a brother,’ mused Charley, as he read Theo's note.

But when he returned to Wyvenhome he did what was better than to wish impossibilities. He asked his father to give him some money and to let him go to work. Not being of the number of people who are long over their deliberations, his plans had been easily formed, and he proposed, if a sufficient sum could be

given or lent him to start with, to get into some tolerable brewing business, and try to rival his grandfather's fortunes.

‘I’ve been idle long enough, father,’ he said.

‘Well, Charley, you shall have some money. Only suppose anything happens to Ned?’

‘We can talk of that when it happens,’ replied Charley.

He was going to do his best for Theo, not to leave her future to chance.

CHAPTER XIV.

IT was the morning after Charley's return. Breakfast at Wyvenhome was ended. Florelle had sat a quarter of an hour at the table, in case there should be any one yet to come down, but had rung at last for the removal of breakfast. When that had begun, as she was herself going towards the door, Rintearn entered.

‘Oh, Mr. Rintearn,’ she exclaimed, ‘have you had no breakfast? I am ashamed to have let the servants commence to clear the table. Please excuse it. I thought you had breakfasted early, before I came down. They will bring back the coffee in an instant.’

She gave some hurried orders to the servant and returned to her seat. ‘What will you take?’ she asked.

‘Only a cup of coffee, please. I must apologise, Miss Curteis, for being so unconscionably late. Please don’t order anything.’

He seated himself with a preoccupied air.

‘Oh, but you must have something to eat,’ replied Flo.

The coffee was brought, and she filled his cup. He had not spoken, but had taken a letter from his pocket, and, as he nervously opened it and commenced to read it, something in his manner appeared to Florelle very strange. Though he was seated at the corner of the table close to her, he seemed to have forgotten her presence, and, with his head supported on his hand, was unconsciously gazing at the letter which he had spread upon the cloth.

Florelle bent a little forward and regarded him. He was pale, and his face had a restless, impatient look.

‘What ought I to do?’ wondered Florelle.

She rose and moving softly put down the cup at his side.

‘I beg your pardon, Miss Curteis,’ he exclaimed, suddenly looking up, ‘I really——’

‘What will you take to eat?’ asked Florelle glancing from him to the table.

He remained motionless, looking up at her, till she turned to see why he made her no reply, her soft lips parting with an expression of concern. Then he quickly turned his eyes away.

‘I hope, Mr. Rintearn,’ began Flo, ‘you have no bad news.’ She was not sure whether she ought to ask a question, and changing what she had meant to say, proceeded, ‘We shall all be so sorry if anything has happened.’

The man made a movement as if he were pulling himself together, and then thrusting the letter into his breast-pocket said in his natural tone, ‘I really am quite ashamed of myself, Miss Curteis. Please do not let me detain you.’

‘What will you take?’ asked Florelle again. He cut himself a little tongue, and she returned

to her seat, and attempted a little conversation.

‘Are you going to shoot to-day, Mr. Rintearn?’

‘No, I am going to Leicester to meet my mother.’

‘You must give Lady Julia all sorts of pretty messages from us. You gentlemen seldom remember things of that kind, but we shall be quite angry with you if you forget this time.’

He made her no answer, but after half a minute looked up and expressed some apology for his rudeness. Then he took two or three more mouthfuls, finished his coffee and rose.

Florelle sat silent, anxious, regarding him, and knitting her slender fingers in her lap.

‘Will you take no more?’ she now asked, ‘you have had but a sorry breakfast.’

‘Nothing, thanks,’ he replied.

He went towards the door, walking slowly, hanging his head.

Florelle's eyes followed him. 'Marcella has refused him,' she thought. 'Poor man, how ill it has made him look.'

He had stopped in his walk, near the door. The girl's heart ached for him, with all the tenderness of a young compassionate nature; and a quick impulse spurred her to do something, without exactly knowing what. She rose and approached him. As she did so he walked on. Florelle made some six steps and stopped.

Rintearn had reached the door. As he opened it, and turned to leave the room, their eyes accidentally met.

Florelle came up to where he stood. 'Oh, Mr. Rintearn,' she said, offering, almost without knowing it, a little hand with its consolation, 'I am so, *so* sorry.'

Then she turned away, for tears, quite unexpected, rose in her eyes.

He pressed the hand given him, dropped it, and turned from the room.

'Good girl, a good girl,' he said to himself

as he crossed the hall, ‘a man might love a girl such as that—if he had not seen the other.’

Florelle had sunk into the nearest chair, and was drying her eyes. ‘Marcella is too cruel,’ she thought, ‘too cruel!’

A hand laid on her shoulder made her look up. It was her mother’s. Though Mrs. Curteis’s face wore a smile, Florelle promptly turned her head aside, and with a sinking heart, got up from her seat.

‘Don’t cry, Florelle,’ said Mrs. Curteis, putting her arm about her. ‘It will all come right, *petite*. Come with me.’

Saying which she led the trembling child from the room, smiling into her abashed face, and, in an approving way, patting her shoulder; Florelle marvelling much why she was being treated in a manner in which she had never been treated, at least by her mother, before. Thus they reached the empty drawing-room, where Mrs. Curteis set her down, almost tenderly, on the ottoman.

‘I saw all, my darling,’ she said, kissing her daughter on the forehead. ‘You are a good girl, and did just as I should have wished.’

‘You saw! Where were you, mamma?’

‘On the terrace.’

‘Oh, mamma,’ began Florelle, speaking quickly, ‘do not you feel sorry for poor Mr. Rintearn? He is in terrible trouble. Do you think Marcella has refused him?’

‘I am sure she has not done so, yet, but—I am equally sure that she will.’

‘Oh yes, I know that,’ replied Florelle, as if she had anticipated hearing something else.

Her mother’s eyes were busy attempting to read her thoughts. She would just then have given a reasonable sum to know what those thoughts were, and what, in consequence, she could most profitably say to Florelle. At last she ventured a meaningless remark,

‘He has wooed her long.’

‘He is mad about her,’ replied Florelle regretfully. ‘He is not a bit nice to her, but he

loves her nobody knows how much. If you see him look at her it is as if he was hungry. And yet she does not care for him the least bit in the world. It must be dreadful for him.'

Mrs. Curteis's eyes brightened. 'You and he seem always to be good friends, Flo.'

'I like him, mamma. And I am sorry for him. If I were a man I would tell him to be wiser, and warn him, and tell him to go away from Marcella. I know she will never love him, and I believe when he finds it out it will break his heart.'

'You like him, *petite*,—and if he liked you?'

'He does like me, I think. He always behaves as though he did,' was the surprised rejoinder.

'I mean—if he loved you, Flo?'

'What nonsense, mamma!' said Florelle, beginning to laugh, 'Mr. Rintearn love me! One would have to be blind indeed not to see there is only one woman in the world for him, my cousin.'

‘That is no reason why—are you listening?’
—Florelle had begun looking about the room as if unconcerned, but now regarded Mrs. Curteis in the face—‘That is no reason why *you* should not some day be Lady Langley if you choose.’

‘*I, mamma!*’—and her eyes showed her amazement.

‘I should like it, Flo.’

‘I am very far from sure I should,’ replied the girl musingly.

‘What should you say, Flo, if he did ask you?’

Florelle looked at her mother with some timidity, then, after a short hesitation, she said, ‘I should say “*No*,”’ but it was said with an air of embarrassed misgiving.

‘Why should you?’ Mrs. Curteis placed herself at her daughter’s side on the ottoman and proceeded, ‘He is a man you do not dislike, a man easy to respect, a man you might learn to love. He has courage, great courage.’

Mrs. Curteis proceeded to enumerate at some length Mr. John Rintearn's good qualities, putting each in the sunniest light, and not forgetting to remind her daughter how easily she might some day regret she had not taken him for a husband. Florelle, with downcast eyes, heard with the silent faint-heartedness her mother at all times awoke in her. In conclusion Mrs. Curteis remarked, 'Think well of it, Flo, and, at least, remember I have told you, and do not be taken by surprise, for, I assure you, you are likely to be asked.'

The girl only looked up at her mother and down again.

'You are wondering what makes me think so,' said the latter replying to her look. 'Flo, I know Mr. Rintearn a great deal better than you do. Marcella is treating him very hardly. She is making no allowance for the power her beauty has over a man of his nature, and she does not understand the species of goading it is to his wilful, inflexible temperament

to be constantly put off and put off from the possession of a thing he sees and wants to have. It was a great misfortune for him that he ever met her, but it has happened, and he cannot alter it, and we ought all to do all we can to help him. Then, you see, your cousin is also being very foolish, like a little spoilt goose that she is, thinking the whole world was only made for her to enjoy, and refusing, just because she does not fancy it, the love of a man who cares more for her little finger than her body and soul are worth together, and who would make her very rich and a great lady. Now, Florelle, Mr. Rintearn is very near the end of his patience. I think if he could he would leave here. But he cannot, he can't go away from Marcella. When you are older you will understand that. Sooner or later a climax must come, and Marcella is doing her best to make it come soon. You know, Florelle, what will happen. Mr. Rintearn will tell her how long he has loved her, and how very

earnestly, and what great things he will do for her. Then she will put on her fine airs, as if no man was good enough for her. You know how unhappy your aunt is about that, I told you the other day. So Mr. Rintearn will be refused. Nothing will make him believe that at first, but, you know, Marcella has said if he ever asked her again she would refuse him in a way that would make it impossible for him ever to renew his attentions, and she is very obstinate. And so in the end she will make him see he will never have her. Then, you will find, his passionate nature will lead him to do strange things, and one of those things will be to ask you to marry him.'

'Why?' asked Florelle hoarsely.

'What does "why" matter, child, if you know "what" is going to happen. I can hardly tell you why. Mr. Rintearn is what the French call a *passionné*. With men of that class it is an instinct, when they have been humiliated by one woman, to offer themselves

on the spot to another. It is a sort of revenge, and a sort of relief. As you are Marcella's cousin he will ask you, to give the proceeding point. If Marcella had a sister, not you, but she would be asked. Certainly'—a quiet smile came over Mrs. Curteis's hard face, and her voice assumed a lighter tone—'I once knew a man who on being disgracefully used by a girl proposed to her mother. He married her too, and a pleasant life they all three led afterwards. But your aunt is not exactly the woman for that. Besides, it will not occur to Mr. Rintearn. He lacks sufficient imagination. He will ask you. And remember, Flo, *passionné* he may be, but a gentleman he certainly is. If he ask a girl to marry him, though he be at the moment beside himself, he will not go back from what he has said, nor do anything but his best to make her life happy. So—think well what you are going to say, and take care that it is not something of which you may have to repent. Now—kiss me—and be a wise girl.'

Flo sadly turned her head, and gave, spiritlessly enough, the demanded kiss. Mrs. Curteis rose, and moved away some steps. Suddenly Florelle raised her head and called after her, 'Mamma !'

'Yes, love.'

'I don't want to be married,' said Florelle beginning to sob, 'not yet.'

Her mother came back, not without tacit impatience, and began stroking the girl's pretty hair. 'There, there, dear,' she said, 'it will be all right in the end ; don't cry.'

But Florelle sobbed on, 'I don't want to be married, mamma. I am too young. I don't love Mr. Rintearn. I don't want him to ask me. I am afraid of him ; at times his eyes are so strange ; and I don't want to be married, not yet.'

Amongst which words Mrs. Curteis found opportunity to steal out of the room.

Rintearn drove to the station and took the

train to Leicester. It was past two when he reached the Hotel where his mother had appointed to meet him.

Lady Julia Rintearn was a tall, stately woman, past middle age, with a large hooked nose, and dark commanding eyes that had a quick manner of moving.

Ushered into the room where she awaited him, Rintearn walked up to her and kissed her, saying, 'Good-morning, mother, how are you to-day?'

There was no semblance of the embarrassment that at breakfast beset him, nor any apparent emotion of love.

His mother bent her head on one side, and looked up from under her heavy brows at his face. 'You had my letter, John?' she asked.

'And am come on account of it.'

Lady Julia threw a letter on the table that stood in the middle of the room, and said, 'What does Hunt Keppel mean by that?'

Then she sat down in the middle of the sofa to watch him.

Rintearn drew a chair to the table, opened the letter, and sat down to read. The letter's purpose was identical with that of Keppel's conversation with him in the copse ; only, set down on paper, Keppel's impression of something underhand, going forward at Wyvenhome, was more vivid. Rintearn refolded the letter, and laying it down on the table leaned back.

‘What does Hunt Keppel mean?’ repeated Lady Julia.

‘He means he does not think the woman I mean to marry a fit match for me. For which reason he desires I should quit the house where she is staying. I much wish Keppel would mind his own business.’

He spoke with quietness, but it plainly cost him an effort.

‘You refer to Miss Cassilys. That is not the meaning I gather from the letter. I understand by it, that Miss Cassilys is only there as a

bait to detain you, and that something underhand is going on. To what does he refer?’

‘I do not know, if it is not what I said.’

There was a short silence. Lady Julia broke it. ‘Are you coming back to Sritten Court, as he advises?’ she asked.

‘I am,’ replied Rintearn with a faint hesitation, ‘on the eve of asking Miss Cassilys to be my wife. I have this time every reason to think she will assent. Is it reasonable that I should, under these circumstances, immediately leave Wyvenhome?’

An inarticulate ‘Hem’ was his mother’s sole reply. She rose from the sofa and took a turn round the room. Then coming to the side of the table opposite her son, she said,

‘John, you are mad about this Miss Cassilys. Your passion for her gets the better of your judgment. You read what Keppel says, that she is unlikely to accept you. This is all some trick, and, John, I *forbid* you to ask Miss Cassilys to marry you.’

‘I hope not, mother,’ replied Rintearn, meeting his mother’s look with another, equally determined, of his own.

‘*I forbid it,*’ repeated the old woman even more sternly, ‘you have already asked her and been refused I know not how many times. This time I forbid you to ask her.’

‘I beg, mother,’ expostulated the young man, ‘that you will consider the painful embarrassment in which such words will place me.’

‘I forbid it,’ repeated the inflexible old woman ; ‘a fast girl of low birth who is lending her influence over you to some contrivance of the Curteis’s——’

‘Mother, you wrong her,’ he interrupted, ‘Keppel has misrepresented things.’

‘—is a person unfit to be your wife, and—I—forbid—you—to—ask—her.’

‘Then I shall be compelled, immensely against my will, to do, what I have never yet done ; to disobey you, mother.’

He rose, and the two stood facing each other.

‘Disobey me! Never before! You have done nothing but disobey me all your life, John. If you do ask her, you may tell her, at the same time that you ask her to marry you, that neither she, nor her children, nor *you*, shall eat at my table, nor enter my house, nor come into my presence, afterwards. But, John,’—she came round the table towards him—‘John, my lad, you won’t do this. I have no one left but you, don’t let this woman take you from me.’

It was the cry of a strange, stern heart, with a mighty power of love that nobody, and least of all her son, appeared to care to accept, nor even to be able to believe in.

‘I have wooed the girl,’ replied Rintearn, ‘how can I now, at the end, play the snob and leave her?’

‘For my sake, John.’

She came to her son’s side, and put one hand on his arm, and the other on his shoulder, both trembling with emotion.

Rintearn said nothing.

So they remained nearly two minutes. Then Lady Julia removed her hands and stepped a little aside.

‘I am mistaken in you, sir,’ she said slowly and deliberately, ‘I wish you good-morning.’

‘Mother!’ exclaimed Rintearn, turning towards her.

‘Come back with me to Sritten Court, or come not near me till I send for you,’ replied his mother determinedly. ‘Are you coming?’

‘I cannot.’

‘To-morrow, or the day after?’

‘And you will remove your prohibition?’

‘Certainly not.’

‘Then do not expect me.’

Lady Julia bowed, and made him a sign to leave. Rintearn took up his hat.

‘Good-bye, mother,’ he said, offering his hand.

‘Good-bye, sir,’ replied Lady Julia shortly, without any symptom of remaining concern, and taking no heed of the proffered hand.

Rintearn left the hotel and walked down to the station.

‘For her sake, for her sake,’ he repeated to himself on the way, ‘for her sake.’

But it comforted him very little.

CHAPTER XV.

THERE was that evening a dinner-party at Wyvenhome. Rintearn did not return in time for it, but, after a short period of hesitation, dressed and went into the drawing-room, where the men had already joined the ladies.

Naturally his first look was for her, for whose love he had forsaken everything. It was with that intense emotion known only to men who have approached crime for a woman's love that his eyes lighted on her person, and his steps turned towards the place where she sat.

Laurier had that instant left her side. Her grand grey eyes were following him with a look that bespoke some sense of injury. Rintearn crossed the room and placed himself near her.

‘Someone has been vexing you, Miss Cassilys,’ he said.

‘Do I show it, then? I am sorry to be so transparent,’ was the annoyed reply. She spread her fan, and continued, ‘Has it ever occurred to you that your friend Mr. Laurier has somewhat disputable taste?’

‘I have always thought the contrary.’

‘Probably, then, I am mistaken.’ She leaned back in her seat, and commenced to fan herself so that the fan moving between them forbade conversation.

What had occurred was this. She had this evening achieved a toilet, her own verdict on which was she had never looked so well. Keppel and Laurier talking to her together, the former had admired it, and made her some neat little compliment. Laurier, whilst the other spoke (as she observed with the quickness natural to a woman), scanned her from head to foot, looked an instant in her face, and then turned his head away, with the hard lines of his handsome

features in seeming harder than ever. He was as capable as any man to say a pleasant thing when he chose, and she interpreted his movement as some indication of disapprobation.

Rintearn patiently waited an opportunity to speak.

Unexpectedly Marcella closed her fan with a snap, and dashed, uninvited, into conversation. To Rintearn her manner appeared unusual. As they spoke of many subjects, in a rapid succession she threw off opinions and rejoinders inconsistent with her wonted happy thought, now reckless, now cynic, at one instant tender to move pity, at the next hard and unkind to mercilessness, her words now a full diapason of sympathy, and then again the narrowest crabbedness of interest.

‘What do you think,’ asked Rintearn, ‘of a man who commits a crime for the woman he loves?’

‘Love should have no bounds, they say.’

‘ You admire the man who recoils from nothing ? ’

‘ No, I pity him, because he is sure, sooner or later, to run his head against a wall.’

‘ But justice should condone his offences ? ’

‘ Not justice. Necessity perhaps.’

‘ How necessity ? ’

‘ Because when peoples’ misdemeanours transcend punishment, there is nothing remaining but to pardon them.’

‘ That is your theory of forgiveness ? ’

‘ I have no theories, or none expressible in words.’

‘ In the eloquence of action only ? ’

‘ Yes,—an eloquence without rhyme or reason.’

‘ Miss Cassilys ! What possesses you to-night ? ’

‘ What do you think, an angel or a demon ? ’

‘ I suggest both.’

‘ You are right,’ she answered, with bitter-

ness ; ‘ to-night I feel myself angel and demon, both in one. It is what I am : what every woman is who ’—she looked at him meaningly —‘ who has never been able to love.’

‘ But when a woman begins to love?’

‘ I know nothing about that,’ she replied, in a tone entirely altered. Then she rose and went away.

Rintearn mused, ‘ What then is making you so unlike yourself?’

It pleased him to see her so.

About an hour passed. Marcella had been playing a duet with Florelle, and was putting away some music. The drawer of the music-stand stuck, and she had to stoop, more than was convenient in her tight dress, to open it. ‘ How tiresome everything is this evening,’ thought Marcella, ‘ a dress that nobody likes but that wretched Mr. Keppel, a dull partner at dinner, a dozen stupid speeches made to Mr. Rintearn, a duet I did not know, and now a drawer that will not open.’

‘Let me open that drawer for you, Miss Cassilys.’

It was Laurier. He knelt on one knee and coaxed the drawer to open a quarter of an inch at a time. The music was put away. ‘Would he help her to put away some of the other pieces?’ ‘With pleasure.’ So she stood handing them to him. Presently as she moved her knee touched his elbow.—‘I beg your pardon,’—‘I beg your pardon,’—simultaneously. ‘That is all.’ He shut the drawer and rose.

‘Thank you very much,’ said Marcella, ‘this *ugly* dress of mine makes it awkward for me to stoop.’

‘Ugly? You are dissatisfied with your dress to-night, Miss Cassilys?’ said Laurier, really uncertain what she meant.

‘Oh please do not flatter,’ she rejoined quickly.

‘One does not flatter people one respects, Miss Cassilys.’

It was said dryly, almost reprovingly, with

that perfect command of tone, forensic practice gives. Marcella turned her head, fixing on his face a questioning look of her dark-grey eyes that seemed to say, 'You must not lie to us.'

'I fear *you* do not much respect any one of my sex, Mr. Laurier,' she said.

'You know it. Yet, recently, the opinion I have formed of the character of one, has suggested to me to think I may sometimes have misjudged others.'

Again the dark-grey eyes from beneath their long brown lashes question the worth of his words.

'In truth? Whose character?' she asks: and her bosom heaves slightly with the emotion a suspicion of his answer awakens.

'Your own, Miss Cassilys.'

Her head droops, only for a moment, then she lifts it again, lifts her white eyelids, lifts her glorious, truthful eyes, and regards him in the face, fixedly, earnestly.

Her bosom is almost motionless now.

Ten seconds their eyes cross fire. It is such looks that light love eternity is not long enough to extinguish.

Then she says, almost timidly, ‘You have made me so proud.’

Her head and her bosom bent to him in a slight inclination, and with an infinite grace, she turned and walked away.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

FAIR AND FREE

VOL. II.



FAIR AND FREE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

‘A MODERN GREEK HEROINE’

*‘A maiden fair and free ;
And for she was her father’s heir,
Full well she was y-cond the leir
Of mickle courtesy’*

DRAYTON

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

LONDON

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1882



FAIR AND FREE.



CHAPTER I.

AT bed-time Charley came into Laurier's room. He was going on the morrow to one of the neighbouring towns, and suggested that if Laurier would come with him, they should breakfast early, and walk thither. 'It will be a reminiscence,' said Charley, 'of our tramps in Alsace.'

Laurier assented, and the next morning appeared at the time named for the early breakfast. Marcella was already in the dining-room sitting by the window, sewing. Whilst he wished her 'Good-morning' Charley entered.

He shook hands with Laurier, and then turned to Marcella, and with 'Good-morning, Marcella,' 'Good-morning, Charley,' they kissed each other on the lips.

Laurier was surprised. This close familiarity between them was a thing he had not previously observed. Now he had seen it, it recalled to his mind several little incidents of the past fortnight, which, though he had not at the time regarded them, now seemed all to point to a similar conclusion, an attachment between the cousins.

The three sat down to breakfast. Marcella was gayer even than usual. A bright sparkle in her eyes, that as she looked from one to the other seemed to flash for a moment and go out, caught the notice alike of Laurier and Charley.

Then with 'Auf Wiedersehen' from her, they set off.

The repose of his long holiday had, in every conceivable way, done Laurier good. He was at no time more conscious of it than

during his walk this morning, as Charley and he swung along the country roads, joining friendly issue concerning men and things, viewed in opposing ways and lights.

‘I like your cousin Miss Cassilys,’ he said.

‘Ah, I thought you would,’ rejoined Charley, ‘she is, you see, after all, a kind of woman you are able to appreciate, notwithstanding what you said to the contrary.’

‘Yes. I am compelled to acknowledge a great deal in her character which not to admire would be an injustice.’

‘Marcella is the best girl breathing, Laurier,’ replied Charley more earnestly than he ordinarily spoke. ‘She has had a splendid education, and you never hear her speak of it. She has the generosity of a saint, and contrives that no one should suspect it. She has the courage and pluck of a lioness, and is as anxious to put herself under protection as a child. Her judgment is juster and finer, and herself more naturally noble than any man or woman I

know, yet you will always find Marcella ready to defer and to submit to someone else. Can you imagine her behaving in the typical feminine way you used to sketch for me on the slopes of the Vosges?’

‘I don’t know. But it does seem a pity a girl such as she is should ever have been a girl.’

‘You are incorrigible, Laurier,’ laughed Charley.

The same afternoon Keppel unexpectedly came on Rintearn, walking alone, in a strange mood, in the avenue. As soon as he perceived Keppel he turned abruptly in his walk and came rapidly towards him.

‘I wish for a few words with you, Mr. Keppel,’ he said peremptorily.

Keppel assented.

‘You have chosen to interfere in my affairs, perhaps you would like to know the result.’

‘You saw your mother yesterday, Jack,’ replied Keppel, entirely unruffled, walking on.

‘Yes,’ answered Rintearn. He found an account of what had happened came very unwillingly to his lips.

‘What did she say about Miss Cassilys?’ asked Keppel, going straight to the point.

‘Forbade me to propose to her.’

‘That is hard on you, Jack, I know,’ said Keppel kindly, ‘but pluck up your courage, man. And, look here, be off. It is hard for you to leave the girl I know, but it will be no better for waiting. Go now at once. Don’t distress yourself about etiquette with the Curteises. They know perfectly well who they are, and who you are, and will always be happy enough to condone your offences if you will come to stay in their house. If you start at once you’ll be in time for the afternoon express, and you can be at home to-night. I’ll see everything is made right here.’

Rintearn was fluctuating between resentment of Keppel’s interference and a sense of his intended kindness:

‘I may as well tell you the truth at once, Keppel,’ he said at last, ‘I have quarrelled with my mother.’

‘About *her*?’ Keppel pointed over his shoulder in the direction of the house.

‘Yes. I told my mother I would not give up Miss Cassilys. And then she forbade me to come to her house, and—so we parted.’

‘Jack, are you mad?’ exclaimed Keppel, emphasising his words with a gesture of his quivering hand. ‘To quarrel with your mother about *that girl*! Why’—he took Rintearn’s great shoulders in his thin, nervous hands, and made him turn and face himself, as he would have turned a child, whilst he continued with mingled sneer, and smile, ‘You great dolt! don’t you know as well as I, that you may have for your wife any one you choose of fifty girls better born, better bred, better portioned, better looking than Miss Cassilys, and for your mistresses a dozen at once every one *her* equal. And what the devil can there

be in one woman to make her equal to a dozen ? But, Jack '—his tone sank—' you'll never have but *one* mother. And to quarrel with her for Miss Cassilys ! Now ; who the deuce is Miss Cassilys ?'

Rintearn had no heart for reply.

' Now, Jack,' continued Keppel, ' this will never do. You must at once come with me to Sritten Court, and I'll make matters right with Lady Julia.'

' Before I leave here, I shall ask Miss Cassilys to be my wife,' said Rintearn, doggedly.

' But, my dear fellow, why should you disobey your mother to be *refused* by Miss Cassilys ? You'll be refused, Jack. I'm sure of it. If there were a chance of Miss Cassilys's marrying you she would not be here another hour. Her aunt would take care of that. I don't know what the old woman is at, but I do know that you are very foolish to quarrel with your mother.'

' I love the girl and I shall ask her to be my wife,' replied Rintearn.

‘Well, if you will agree to no other terms, let me ascertain *sub rosa* what answer you are going to get. Charley Curteis will be able to find out in half an hour. If it is going to be “No,” you may as well not ask.’

‘And are the back stairs the way you imagine I shall treat with Marcella Cassilys?’ inquired Rintearn with honest indignation.

Keppel folded his arms and regarded him half a minute. ‘You are your mother’s son, Jack,’ he said, ‘only, if you get yourself into a mess, remember it is not my fault.’

Before night a rumour, vague, but undisputed, had crept over the house that ‘There was a serious disagreement between Rintearn and his mother, about Miss Cassilys.’

It was generally spoken of as an unfortunate thing for Marcella.

Laurier formed his own views on the subject. ‘After all a woman was a woman. A coronet, a fortune, and a great passion on one side of the balance, there could be little doubt

where her choice would fall, even though future difficulties and a liking for her cousin, perhaps a sincere one, hung in the other scale. A pity, for there was material in Miss Cassilys for better things than an uneven match with a man of more passion than sense. But the truth was, it was a poor chance to be a woman.'

However, when the day had passed, Rintearn had not proposed.

The day following was a Sunday. Coming out of church after morning service, Marcella and Laurier chanced to be side by side, and walked on together. The way home was a little over three-quarters of a mile, a country lane, with a sharp ascent, at spots overhung by trees. Ascending the hill the two drew in advance till some little distance separated them from the rest of the party.

It was a chill day, with a slow monotonous moist wind. Low, leaden clouds threatening rain vaulted the sky and lent their sadness to

the hues of nature commencing on every side to fade.

‘Autumn advances fast,’ said Laurier.

‘Yes,’ replied Marcella, ‘all is ready for a change.’

She plucked, as they passed, a common plant from the hedge, and gently touching the leaves and small branches made them fall from the parent stem, their connections with which were already decayed. Her face wore a pensive look, and Laurier, watching it, asked,

‘Are you one of those susceptible to the melancholy of autumn, Miss Cassilys?’

Marcella, on the point to ask him whether botany interested him, was conscious of a little surprise, and ‘What an odd question from you!’ almost passed her lips.

But that was in the first instant only. The next to the movement of wonder succeeded another of pleasure. Was it possible the hard woman-hating man had found something in her which led him to wish to know more? In the

short moment a woman needs to perform the precipitation of thought which determines her intuition as reasoning determines the judgment of a man, she had come to think it was so.

“The melancholy of autumn,” she replied; ‘I think I do feel it, a little. Summer is so beautiful, and there is always a something sombre where things are perishing. It is, I suppose, the presence of that worst of all.’

‘What is it you name the worst of all?’

‘That *end* of which I hate the very name.’

‘Death?’

‘We will not speak of it, please.’

The voice was not that of a lurking timidity, but of a relentless aversion. Laurier took a side look at her. Her eyes were cast down, and her face wore the severe impression of a determination to banish distasteful thoughts. What a strange girl she was—certainly a strangely handsome one. It was curious he should have taken so long to see it. Perhaps, after all, that was the highest thing a woman

could be. Possibly beyond that, and the conscious pride in herself that gave her, her worth was less than it seemed.

But she interrupted his soliloquy.

‘ Yet, I like autumn, I have a sort of fondness for it. I am only a woman remember, and my thought will seem folly to you, but I have a fondness for autumn that is one quite by itself. It is so grand a change, and everything that changes has an indefinite charm for me. Change always appears to me the most real thing there is in this vague life of ours. But I love autumn changes most, for this, that they end in beauty like all the rest, and help one to think that beauty is in some way immortal.’

‘ You confess to a love of change ? ’

‘ It is the law of the world, and I have for everything that is of the world, a very deep love. It is my fairyland, “fairer than dreams,” my elysium, or rather, to say the truth, I have never read nor heard, nor have been able to think, neither about fairyland, nor elysium, nor

paradise, nor heaven itself, anything so beautiful, or that I could love one-half so well as I love this world.'

'And you would wish nothing altered?'

'I do not concern myself about wishing impossibilities, but to enjoy what I have.'

'And that satisfies you.'

'Yes, indeed. I am a part of the life of this glorious world and am more than satisfied.'

'And do you think that will be always so?'

'I cannot tell. I live in the present not in the future, and it is enough for me that I enjoy the present.'

There was a little silence. The crisp road crackled lightly beneath their tread, and the chill wind soughed through the branches above.

'Yours is a strong, intense way of living, Miss Cassilys,' observed Laurier.

'I believe it is.'

Another silence.

‘When I turn philosopher I shall be a disciple of your creed, Miss Cassilys.’

‘You will not regret it.’

‘Did you ever discuss it with Mr. Keppel?’

‘No. I would not. Mr. Keppel is a man I detest.’

‘Indeed! Why?’

She hesitated a space and then replied, a trifle more energetically than her usual dignified way allowed,

‘Because, Mr. Laurier, he pleases everything that is bad and wrong in me. When he talks to me he makes me be interested against my will, whilst I, all the time, feel he is morally pushing me down to a lower, baser level of life. I think you can understand me,’—she looked at him as if, not accustomed always to be understood, she had some opinion of sympathetic intelligence on his part—‘Mr. Keppel wakes up the thoughts I try to stifle, and scatters the strength I labour to husband. I cannot explain to you how that is done, I have myself in vain

tried to understand it. He is too subtle, too ingenious for me. He humbles me in my own eyes, and makes me *think* the sort of things you *say*.'

'Why?'

'Why? Why should he always leave me a weaker and worse woman for having talked with him? I do not know. I suppose he wishes it.'

They had reached the top of the hill, and a little gate that led into the grounds. Laurier held it open for her to pass. When he came again to her side, he said,

'I am learning, on the other hand, to have a great liking for Mr. Keppel. He is, you of course know, a man of a superior kind.'

She made no answer. Then suddenly turning to him, she asked,

'Mr. Laurier, what has made both you and Mr. Keppel have so low an opinion of women? Tell me?'

'I can say nothing for Mr. Keppel. For

myself—too much knowledge of them, Miss Cassilys.’

‘You have had, I suppose, great opportunities of judging?’

‘In my profession one sees women under circumstances in which they must completely unmask.’

‘Poor things!’ said Marcella. ‘But do you not perceive, Mr. Laurier, that a woman completely unmasked, is not, cannot be, herself?’

He had not seen it, and it gave him whereof to think.

Some of the others came up with them, and, in the rearrangement of the party that ensued, Laurier, with some regret, exchanged Miss Cassilys’s companionship for that of Mr. Curteis.

Indisputably there existed a something that was rapidly drawing these two into intimacy with each other. Was it that strong natures, however differing in cast, have always a substratum in common? Or was it only that there

is in every man's life a point of time at which the Eternal Feminine becomes a factor in his being?

However that might be, this is certain, that human life contains no group of impressions more delicately fine, no circumstances more enticing than the quiet, even pleasures of young men and women commencing an honest, reasoning friendship. Nothing is further from them than the intention or suspicion of love. They like each other the more for liking each other the less, and are rightly conscious that they understand all that is best in each other the better for their indifference to each other's persons. All the vividness of their lives, their impressionability, and the generousness of their reciprocity, come into full play in a ready dispassionate enjoyment of taking, and giving, and comprehending the best of all either has to exchange ; of being, in the highest sense, *humane* towards each other, and that in a cool, bracing mental-atmosphere secure from the heated,

blurred impressions, and the labouring thoughts that come with love.

Alas, that to meet with pleasure without emotion, to converse with interest without anxieties, to part with smiles without regret, should be so short a stage in the acquaintance of women with men.

In the course of the day Keppel again appealed to Rintearn. The latter, though he had had opportunity, had not yet spoken to Marcella. A letter had come from Lady Julia. It is true it was in the third person, conceded nothing, and was difficult to understand, yet, it was doubtless intended for a preliminary of reconciliations; and Keppel, with a hope this might have had some weight with Rintearn, spoke to that effect, with a cogent kindness, greater even than before.

He found himself, however, entirely mistaken. What was keeping back Rintearn was merely the morbid timidity of the fatal cast

that holds every man whose love is a mere passion.

The passionate lover believes incurably in chance. Can he hit the right word, the right moment, his mistress's assent is assured. If she say, 'No,' that will be because he takes a wrong time, or a wrong mode of beseeching.

Being of which opinion Rintearn turned in purpose forwards and backwards, restless of mind and will, and grew unmanageable alike by himself or by any one else.

Analysis of such tempers is tiresome, and also, at best, but inadequate. A mere phantasmagoria is all that is ever obtainable in a glimpse of the interior of a soul. Now and then in the course of a life-time an accident unveils to each individual some such view. It resembles in nothing what was anticipated. There is a species of seclusion, less or more obscure, in whose centre is descried an inexpressible group: two or three ideas drooping torpid, or whirling in struggle or revel, in the

midst of an indistinguishable medley of shadows fallen asleep. But in that vision is seen the 'why' of human life.

Night fell, and Rintearn had not proposed.

Monday dawned, a beautiful day, propitious for a grand battue that was to take place.

In the morning, before the shooting party set out, Rintearn observed Marcella and Florelle gathering flowers for bouquets, late roses, and dahlias, and what else they could find. He strolled out on the lawn and joined them. They gave him their wooden basket to carry, and till they had finished he strayed about with them, talking with one or both, Marcella chilly, Florelle kind.

He asked for a flower, and Miss Curteis would have given him one from the basket had not her cousin suggested some rosebuds might still be found in the rosary, where a sprig of sweetbriar was also to be had. So they went there on their way back. Marcella cut an opening bud, and gave it to Florelle, who,

tying it up in a pretty knot with a sprig of sweetbriar, presented it to Rintearn. Then they thanked him for his assistance, and, wishing him a pleasant day's sport, took the basket and went in.

‘Unconcerned and unconcernedly,’ he muttered as he strolled away. He nipped off the rosebud and, from a short distance, neatly flicked it into a stucco vase, and threw the stem and sweetbriar under the shrubs.

The success of the battue is no part of this story. Rintearn, whose sportsmanship Charley had in no way overrated, shot like a man partially drunk. At the end of some time, accidentally being for a minute alone with Laurier, he turned to him and said,

‘I am sick of this. Should you dislike a walk? I feel as if a long spin would do me good. What do you say?’

‘By all means.’

They gave their guns to one of the men, and struck away from the woods. Emerging

at length from a fir plantation upon the high road, they set out upon it across the common before them. Rintearn's walk was a long, fatiguing stride, to-day smarter even than usual, under the influence of an excitement he wished to control. Silent at first he afterwards fell into a talk of birds and beasts. Like many sportsmen of the better sort a passable naturalist, he had a love for wild things of every kind, and a keen interest in their habits and homes.

‘Poor little beggars,’ he presently said, ‘theirs is a queer chance, with a grim end to close it. Unless they meet with a violent end every one of them must die of starvation. Yet while their sunshine lasts, knowing nothing of what is to come, they are, in their way, merry enough. So much for ignorance in these days of advance. Do you, Laurier, sometimes suspect we are getting to know too much?’

‘I don't see how that can be, so long as it remains in any remotest way possible to turn the knowledge we get to our benefit and use.’

‘Benefit and use ! That is the way all you thinking men talk. I suppose it is so with you. Your knowledge is to you some benefit and use. But you really ought to remember that you are the rare exceptions. Most of us don’t think, at least not in the way you call thinking. Our lives depend just upon what comes in our way. A good many of us would be vastly puzzled to say with any truth what benefit or use our learning has been to us.’

Laurier laughed.

‘You thinking men,’ proceeded Rintearn, ‘never appear to see how utterly unreal you are when you talk to the rest of us as if we were like yourselves. If we don’t understand life, be sure we don’t understand you. We eat and drink, and go about, and spend money, and see and hear things, and what you manage to live upon seems to us thinner than dreams. Your hopes are things we should be sorry to have happen to us, and the thoughts that bear you through life are straws we might drown

holding, but which could never keep us afloat. I've had my share of disappointments, but I cannot say I ever found anything a thoughtful man said to me worth the trouble of hearing.'

'Under such circumstances, what do you find, then, of assistance?'

'Ah, that is the question. But, now, listen to that little fellow's merry singing.'—He pointed to a tree in which some bird of whose name and note Laurier was ignorant, was piping merrily.—'What does he know but that it is warm to-day, and that his poor little belly is full? When winter comes, and his hunger, he'll run his chance. If he come out of the hard frosts alive, he'll sing again. If not, he'll be out of his hunger for ever, which he does not know. You are a thinker, you know, and I dare say you won't see it, but to me it appears that when things go wrong, we and the birds and beasts make all one family. It draws one to them, and makes a man covet the dumb

patience of his dog, or a bird's ignorance to enjoy the pleasant sunshine whilst it lasts.'

'And when it ends?'

'Starve or die, because you cannot help it. The rest is all words.'

'I don't think it is, you know. Miss Cassilys is not ignorant, yet she will tell you she can enjoy the sunshine whilst it lasts. And I think she speaks the truth.'

'Oh yes. She is one of you thinkers. I wish she was not; she would have been my wife before this.'

From the common they entered a wood. Whither their way led, or what path should bring them back, Laurier had wondered but not inquired. He was loth to rob Rintearn of the relief from himself which he doubted not the long walk was purposed to bring him.

Suddenly the latter stopped.

'Look there,' he said, pointing to what seemed to Laurier an insignificant plant, raising its slender angular stem and tiny, greenish-white

blossom in a damp spot in the wood, 'that is the lesser butterfly orchis. It is late for it, I think.'

He stepped to it, and stooped as if about to pluck it, or take it up with its root. Then he changed his mind, and said, 'It is no use, I'll let it flower.'

'What is no use?' asked Laurier.

'Miss Cassilys asked about this plant a day or two since, saying she had never seen it.'

'You will take it to her, won't you?'

'No.—I don't know how she might take it.'

'I should say she would be pleased.'

'Quite as likely to be offended.'

He had returned to Laurier's side.

'Miss Cassilys's is not, as I understand her, so ill a nature as to be offended by a simple attention,' said Laurier.

Rintearn hesitated some time before he replied, 'My dear Laurier, you don't understand where things between Miss Cassilys and me have arrived. I don't want to persuade

her to permit my attentions, I want to persuade her to marry me. I've little doubt now that she will, but I am not deceiving myself on the subject. That will not be because I have brought her home a flower, any more than it will be because she likes me, for I know she does not, but for other reasons, which I do hope will have weight with her at last. All I at present concern myself about is not to ruffle her.'

Laurier thought he understood him, and Rintearn's view of the case appeared to him one likely enough. But he liked Rintearn and ventured to remark,

'Will that mean a happy life afterwards, Rintearn?'

'Very likely not,' was the reply, in the tone of a man whom dangers are powerless to turn from the bent of his mind.

They walked some distance in silence, whilst the narrow shaded road, cut with deep cart ruts near its edges, wound upwards among irregular trees, below which grew a thick and ragged

scrub. On the left the sparkling sunshine penetrated the foliage, making, amid the tangled growths, every gradation of bright and shaded translucent leaves, barred by black branches, here and there it pierced even the brushwood and glowed on indistinguishable leaves beneath. On their right the branches caught lights and the foliage shade, till the near distance of the thicket was lost in gloom. Overhead the meeting trees meshed their branches together, but with many a break through which the clear blue sky shone down.

Unexpectedly, near the crown of the hill, they met a woman and a girl with a little maiden just able to toddle. Two or three straws lay in the road, and the child wished to pick up one of them. She stopped in her tottering walk, stooped, and almost fell, and yet could not reach the straw. The girl holding her hand drew her forward, saying, 'Come on, now, come on.' But the child looked back. 'Me want,' she said. 'What does she want?'

asked the woman. 'One of those straws. Now'—to the child—'come on.' The child began to cry.

Laurier and Rintearn had come up to them. Rintearn, who had been watching the scene, took a sovereign from his pocket, and stooping offered it to the tiny maiden. Her strange little questioning eyes looked for half a minute at the red gold, and then she turned away, and made a step back towards the straw.

'Let the child have her straw,' said Rintearn to the astonished girl, as he returned the sovereign to his pocket, 'the day may come when you will want yours.'

Then he strode on. Presently he turned to Laurier with a grim smile, and said,

'All straws, no doubt; but when you want them! Miss Cassilys is my straw.'

When they returned to Wyvenhome it wanted but a few minutes of the dinner hour. They had walked a preposterous distance. The

latter part of their walk had been dull and silent. Laurier was dropping with fatigue, and Rintearn even confessed himself tired.

Again night and nothing said. And this closed Lady Julia's three days of grace.

But the next morning, after breakfast, Marcella said to her mother,

‘Mr. Rintearn has asked for half an hour's conversation with me in private.’

‘And you?’

‘Have promised it him. This time I am going to make an end of it.’

In the course of the morning, strolling with Mrs. Curteis through the conservatories, Mrs. Cassilys, much interested in some of the plants, and very little in the approaching *dénoûment*, remarked, in her insouciant way,

‘Marcella tells me Mr. Rintearn has asked her for an interview, and that she has promised to see him in the little drawing-room, about an hour before dinner.’

Mrs. Curteis felt a disposition to make an

exclamation, and suppressed it. She said quietly,

‘I fear something very unpleasant concerning Marcella has passed between Mr. Rintearn and his mother.’

But she hastened to make an excuse for leaving the conservatory to be alone to think.

So all had befallen exactly as she had anticipated. Marcella silly and obstinate, Mrs. Cassilys careless, Keppel a mischief-maker, Rintearn fascinated, infatuated, blinded to facts, and determined to follow out his passion.

‘And now,’ quoth Mrs. Curteis, ‘for an explosion!’

CHAPTER II.

SHE sent for Florelle.

‘So Marcella Cassilys has told you something,’ she said abruptly as her daughter entered.

‘Told me something?’ repeated Florelle, with a look of innocent amazement at her mother’s stern eyes searching her very soul.

Evidently Florelle knew nothing.

‘You will be dressed for dinner to-day an hour before dinner-time,’ said her mother. ‘I may want you. Now go.’

A little before half-past six she came into Flo’s room. The girl was far from dressed. That was not disobedience but the child’s habitual tardiness. Mrs. Curteis assisted at the completion of her toilet. When it was finished

she bade Florelle stand at a little distance and place herself in this position and that to show off its effect. After that she made her take off her dress and don another. Satisfied at length, she placed something on the dressing-table, and bade Florelle sit in a chair in the light.

‘Do not be frightened,’ she said, ‘I am not going to hurt you.’

At the same time she took one of the girl’s eyelids and attempted to fold its edge outwards.

‘Oh, mamma,’ exclaimed Florelle pushing away her mother’s hands.

‘I am not going to hurt you, Flo, I assure you.’

But Florelle had had time to guess what was going to be done.

‘Oh, mamma, you are going to paint my eyes. You must not. I don’t want to be painted. I won’t be painted.’ She began to get up from her chair.

‘Sit down, Flo,’ said her mother, ‘*sit down.*’

Florelle sat down looking piteous.

‘Now hold up your head, or I may hurt you.’

With a miserable ‘Oh!’ Florelle lifted the childlike beauty of her face to the ghastly disfigurement of having her eyelids turned inside out. Mrs. Curteis applied the kohl with a speed and ease that signified practice. The lids were restored to their normal position, and Flo was permitted to rise.

Flashing the now more than natural brightness of her fine eyes at her mother, she said, with an air of proud disconsolateness,

‘Now I have been painted.’

Mrs. Curteis smiled—at the successfulness of her painting.

‘Now, Flo,’ she said, ‘in a few minutes I may want you. Go and wait in the great drawing-room. Don’t sit down, you may crumple your dress, and keep near the hearth that you may be found at once.’

Florelle obeyed. In the large empty room the rosewood folding doors that separated it from the lesser drawing-room were closed.

The girl made her way to the hearth, and resting her golden head on her arm supported against the marble mantel, looked down into the flames, and thought.

‘Painted, painted, painted!’

If she heard any sounds from the inner room she was too much immersed in her own shame to heed them.

Marcella had kept Rintearn waiting. When she entered the room he was standing with his arms folded and his eyes fixed on the Sèvres clock on the chimney-piece, awaiting her coming. He had passed beyond that state in which a man cannot rest, and reached the sterner one to which stillness is natural.

She stepped to a seat near him, a low arm-chair, and placing herself at her graceful ease, first disposed her train (she was dressed for dinner) on the carpet, and then looked up at him with an expression that announced, ‘Well, here I am.’

He sat down on the ottoman, a short distance from her, and with his eyes on the train of her dress, said, with a little hesitation,

‘My sincerest thanks for your—kindness, Miss Cassilys, in granting my request for this interview—I—I——’

He stopped embarrassed for words.

She remained silent and still, her eyes fixed on the pattern of her silks.

Placing his elbows on his knees, Rintearn, leaning towards her, spoke again, in the clumsy phrases of a man under the power of a strong emotion, and unaccustomed to express his meaning respecting uncommon concerns, something to this effect, that his mother had sent for him last week, and put him in a very awkward position; in fact, compelled him to choose between herself and Miss Cassilys. His choice could be only one, was no choice. And in consequence his mother and he had quarrelled.

Marcella made no reply. He proceeded,

‘I am not regretting, I could not regret, the course I have chosen, but I am very sorry to have had to quarrel with my mother. She will feel it bitterly. You may as well know how far it has gone. I am forbidden her house and her presence.’

‘For ever?’ asked Marcella in an undertone.

‘My mother is a woman who does not relent, and so I fear it is—for ever.’

She looked thoughtful, but still volunteered no reply, and Rintearn continued,

‘It came to this. She bade me either never come into her presence, unless she summoned me, or—renounce you—and you see I had no choice.’

A faint blush rose on Marcella’s cheek, and she hung her head a little.

‘I am an outcast for your sake, Miss Cassilys,’ urged Rintearn, now in more moving tones, ‘I do not repent it. I hope through that, now at least, at last, it may weigh something with you, that I have not only laid all at your

feet, but dared to give up everything, even my nearest and dearest, for *you*.'

'I am really sorry for this man; that he should be so utterly infatuated,' thought Marcella, but she still remained silent.

'Marcella,' he prayed, 'tell me there is hope for me, somewhere, you, my last hope,—be my wife—my life.'

In his tone was a sound, as if what he said came from a distance, a spell of a voice far, far away. It smote on Marcella's brain with the resonance of a passion deep and dread.

'I cannot,' she answered quietly.

She changed her position so that he only saw a portion of her face.

'Is love of no weight with you? Can nothing that a man can give, or do, or bear touch you?' urged Rintearn, passion lending him some eloquence.

'I am very sorry, Mr. Rintearn,' she replied without moving, 'that you have quarrelled with Lady Julia. I told you, long ago, that I do

not love you, never have loved you, and never shall love you. What more can I say?’

It spoke much for the man's nature that his courage still carried him on. He rose from his seat and came and stood where she could see him. Then folding his arms he said, a little bitterly,

‘I have lately thought otherwise. I think you know it. Marcella, can the day never come when you will be my wife? I will take a little love from you for much.’

He knew he dare not say to her that he wanted her, and if she could not love him, would readily take her unloved.

‘It can never come—and, if you have thought it could, you have been deceiving yourself.’

The tone was very merciless. She did not look up at him. Her eyes were fixed on the point of her small foot, toying with the edging of her dress.

‘Lately,’ he said, ‘you told me you had never loved.’

‘Neither have I.’

‘How do you know you will not love?’

She made him no answer.

‘I could name to you, Marcella, the days when I never thought of loving you. Yet I have loved you—how long!’

‘Too long,’ suggested Marcella, her eyes and thought wandering about the room in the idlest unconcern.

‘With a love that has stopped at nothing—a love without bounds—as you, a few days ago, said love should be.’

‘No. I said such love was very foolish.’

‘Why is it impossible that you should learn to love me, as I have loved you?’

‘Why? I don’t know. I tell you it *is* impossible.’

‘You love some other man,’ he now said angrily, ‘some man utterly unworthy of you.’

‘I do not speak untruths,’ she replied quietly, almost dreamily, ‘and I tell you I love no one.’

‘Have you, Miss Cassilys, no needs, no sympathies, no tenderness, no——’

‘Mr. Rintearn,’ she interrupted him, ‘I tell you again I know nothing of all this. If you are going to hold such language with me, you may as well speak Chinese.’

He regarded her for a moment, and then put his hand to his mouth. It was the first sign of discomfiture he had made. The fact, not of reluctance on her part, but of another refusal was beginning to lower before him.

In the other drawing-room one of the doors opened, and the softest sound of a footfall was audible, though Marcella had, on entering, closed the folding doors behind her. Then all was again still.

It was Florelle.

After a longer pause Rintearn spoke again.

‘Then, Miss Cassilys’—he broke off what he meant to say—‘Marcella, I am mad for you. Do you know what you are to me?’

My life is empty without you. But you are beautiful, and you have no pity——’

He made a quick step towards her, and then commanding himself with a strain, turned away, with his teeth locked, and his fist clenched at his side.

She had shrunk aside with a start as he stepped towards her, but recovered herself on the spot. Now she said reflectively,

‘Mr. Rintearn——’

He turned, and as he did so she rose.

‘I sincerely hope, Mr. Rintearn,’ she was carefully measuring her words, ‘that this may be the last of these painful scenes between you and me——’

‘No,’ he interrupted her with energy, ‘not so, Miss Cassilys. I am not a devil that you should take hope from me.’

‘It is for nothing else that I have consented to-night to meet you here,’ she replied, looking into his face with all the hard sternness of which beauty of her kind can be so expressive,

‘I am not the woman ever to be your wife. That is decided, irrevocably. If there are any words which could more plainly express my meaning, please imagine them said. And now ’—she offered him her hand—‘good-bye. I wish you nothing but good. Go to Lady Julia Rintearn, and assure her Marcella Cassilys is nothing to you and never can be. I am sure Lady Julia will welcome you, and I shall have the pleasure of thinking a great mistake has been rectified.’

One hand behind his back, the other clasped upon the edge of the front of his dress-coat, he stood looking at her, as if asking himself whether he should take her finely moulded shoulders in his hands, and with a triumphant ‘No, madam,’ drag her into his arms and bear her away by force.

In all her seductions—beautiful in a way other women, fairer than she, were not, formed like a goddess, robed in silks close fitting to make a man mad, voiced witchingly, with the

soft scent of perfume stealing from her dress, and her warm breath almost sensible on his face—to tell him go say ‘She was nothing to him!’

As he kept her waiting her eyes and her hand dropped.

‘Do you *hate* me?’ he asked at last in a hollow voice.

She looked up, ‘I hate no one.’

‘Ah, but you dislike me, I know, and heartily.’

‘No, Mr. Rintearn,’ she returned with a good deal of dignity, ‘I neither like you nor dislike you. You are to me simply indifferent, cannot you understand that? Surely it is nothing extraordinary. But I do not think it is honourable of you, after I have so often said this to you, to continue ceaselessly to importunate me for an affection I cannot bestow. I begin to feel myself very much dishonoured by the manner in which you refuse me any right to give you a reply, other than you are yourself pleased to demand: and, I have only

to say, the only thing you have left it possible for me to say, that I shall regard any repetition of your insistance after this, as an acknowledgment you do not concern yourself to treat me with respect.'

Their eyes met, one instant. His trembling, and hers filled only with the annoyance a girl bred to politeness experiences on being forced by her circumstances to the very limits of courtesy.

Then without word or gesture he walked slowly away from her.

At the door he turned back. She had made a step or two towards the hearth.

The man was desperate.

'You shall be mine,' he said passionately, coming close up to her, 'I love you, Marcella, and I will have you.'

'Is that a threat, sir, or only an impertinence?' she asked with an absolute composure.

He gave her a look of defiance for reply, and then strode out of the room.

For ever without her !

And behind him, as he opened the folding doors, he could hear her poking the fire !

She stirred up a cheerful blaze, and then ensconced herself in the pleasantest chair by the hearth. All that had passed in so rapid a course came back through her memory, the man's dumb gesture of defeat, the hunger in his eyes, the far-off sound of his voice, and a wonder whether to love was always so stormy and wild a thing.

'I think we have come to the end of the chapter at last,' she soliloquised.

A look at the clock assured her she might hope for twenty minutes' undisturbed reading, and she took up a book from one of the tables. But her hands sank with the book into her lap, and her eyes went back to the flames, as a shade of melancholy fell on her face.

'I am very sorry I have had to make the poor man so wretched,' she mused.

Then the book was again taken up, and

again sank on her knees, and so on, till she at length rose and left the room.

Rintearn passed from the one drawing-room into the other. However bitter his thoughts, a man crossing a room must look whither he is going. So before Rintearn had advanced many steps, he raised his eyes and looked before him.

By the hearth stood Florelle Curteis.

She was still in much the same position, a little bent, resting her head now on her hand, the other hand pressed on her bosom as if she suffered some pain, her eyes cast down on the ground. Alone, in the rich room, with the patient shame in her tender face, she made a tableau delicately, picturesquely sorrowful.

Rintearn paused to regard her. Then turning from the direction he had previously taken, he walked straight towards where she stood. As he came nearer she looked up with

a quick surprise, in herself wondering whence he had come.

‘Miss Curteis?’ he said half beseechingly.

‘Yes, Mr. Rintearn.’

She fixed on his face her soft blue eyes, so strangely lustrous to-night in their trouble, and her pretty lips subsided into lines suggesting concern and mingled alarm.

‘Are you a woman, Miss Curteis, who could console a desperate man?’

The voice was firm and decisive, but hurried.

‘I?’ replied Florelle, in doubt, joining her hands before her breast, and nervously knitting her rosy fingers, ‘Who can tell?’

She was looking in his face for some answer to her puzzled impressions, when her memory woke the thought of the kohl on her eyelids. She dropped her eyes on the spot, hanging her head, and looking aside. The act resembled exactly the coy movement of a maiden suddenly made aware of the full import of the half understood words of a declaration.

And the eager shock of revenge found within reach, at the same instant passed over Rintearn. This very night the haughty beauty in the other room should know at what price he reckoned her scorn.

‘Miss Curteis,’ he said gently, ‘I have lost all I have loved or lived for—you who have compassion—give me life and love again.’ He caught her hand, for her face was turned away. ‘Beautiful Florelle, be my wife, and I will not only love but worship you.’

The girl moved her hand to disengage it. So wild a storm of thoughts whirled around her that no word, nor even purpose of words, would take form. Only burning blushes came on her cheeks, whilst amid the coals two little jets of flame, with alternating whiffs of fire, held the attention of her eyes.

‘My love, my bride,’ fell on her bewildered ears.

‘Oh, I must never let him be able to say I encouraged him,’ suddenly came into Flo’s

distracted mind. It was the first thought to which she contrived to give form, and was immediately succeeded by others, 'I must say "No," and he must go away from me.'

At the same time she became aware of a sense unknown before, a something, a sort of sternness, that stole over her sinews and muscles, and seemed of itself to creep into her veins and nerves, and gave her a strength to repel, which she had never suspected her nature contained. She even lifted her head a little, and though she had not quite enough courage to look in the man's face, yet spoke with a well mastered voice,

'You must please not speak so to me, Mr. Rintearn.'

'Why, Florelle?' he said coaxingly, again seeking her hand, for he believed her only coy.

'No, no,' she exclaimed quickly, now entirely mistress of herself, at the same time moving away from his touch, and looking him

directly in the eyes. 'Mr. Rintearn, you do me a great honour. I thank you very much. But I cannot be your wife. I do not love you.'

There was no opportunity to misunderstand that. She had said it very prettily, and now went on,

'I fear I do not quite know how I should speak to you. I am little more than a child. But, I am sorry, if I have much pained you.'

For some reason unknown to himself, or for entire loss of all reason to do anything, Rintearn remained standing where he was.

On a sudden, an idea occurred to Flo.

'Have you had a quarrel with Marcella?' she asked quickly.

'Yes,' he almost hissed at her.

Florelle thought awhile.

'And you,' she spoke with a certain incisiveness, 'have said what you have said to me, only because you have quarrelled with her.'

The kohl was entirely forgotten, and she

looked in his face, with half contemptuous, half reproachful eyes.

How unlike the soft, yielding child he had thought her !

It was some time before he replied in a bitter way,

‘I have been making a fool of myself, Miss Curteis.’

That did not appear to Miss Curteis much to do with the matter. Rintearn folded his arms, and regarded the carpet at his feet. His companion began to be sensible of a certain humiliation. Suddenly Rintearn said, apparently to himself

‘Both the brewer’s grand-daughters !’

Then he turned sharply and walked out of the room.

‘I should like to box his ears,’ thought Florelle.

‘So I have had my first offer,’ she mused ; ‘all circumstances considered not a very flattering one. Still number one. And that is *one*.

I wonder how many I shall have? If I had said "Yes" to this one, I should have been some day Lady Langley,'—she brought her hand with a quick movement to her lips—'Goodness gracious, I never gave it a thought, but what *will* mamma say? And she told me all about it, and how it would happen, and what I was to say, and that all the while I should not once think of it! Well, I could never have accepted him. I don't love him a bit. I must tell mamma that. How I do wonder what she will say. Will she be *awfully* angry?'

Poor Florelle began to look frightened.

A tap on the shoulder broke the thread of her anxious thoughts, and made her turn with a start.

'Well, cousin?' It was Marcella.

'What has happened, Flo?'

'Oh—nothing. Have you seen mamma? I am to wait for her here, and I am quite tired with standing.'

'Have *you* seen any one, Flo?' returned

Marcella, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

‘Whom should I have seen?’ rejoined Florelle awkwardly.

‘I should say Mr. Rintearn. As he, in the other drawing-room, did me the favour for the ninth or tenth time to request me to marry him, and must, after leaving me, have passed through this room; unless you have entered very recently you must have seen him—in fact, I can see you have seen him. And’—Marcella’s face assumed an expression of immense amusement—‘excuse me, but, you do look so very guilty. Flo, did he ask *you* too to marry him?’

‘Yes, Marcella,’ replied Flo a little downcast, and a little demurely.

‘And you refused him of course.’

‘Of course. I don’t care for him. And I am not so ignorant as to suppose he cares for me. It is pretty patent whom he does wish to marry, I fancy.’

‘Yes,’ sighed Marcella, ‘but that is finished. I have at last, I think, succeeded in making him understand it. Aunty will scold you, Flo.’

‘I am not going to tell her.’

‘That won’t do, Flo. You must tell her. She will insist upon knowing, and, Flo, she has a right to know. Why,’ Marcella drew a little nearer, ‘Flo, have you been painting your eyes?’

‘Mamma painted them,’ blurted out Flo.

‘You should not have let her. I am ashamed of you.’

‘*Must* I tell mamma about Mr. Rintearn, Marcella?’ asked Florelle timidly.

‘Yes, Flo, you must. If you will take my advice, tell her at once. You will find it easier. You will be scolded ; but you may as well have it, and have it over.’

‘I can’t go now,’ observed Florelle, glad enough of an excuse to postpone the ordeal. ‘Mamma particularly bade me to wait here till she sent for me.’

‘When did she send you here?’

‘Some half-hour since.’

Marcella bit her lip. ‘I’m afraid you will be dreadfully scolded, Flo,’ she said; ‘you know what you have done is no joking matter.’

‘What have I done?’ asked the child innocently.

‘Oh, you darling, simple-hearted goose,’ answered her cousin kissing her. ‘Can’t you see that your mother sent you here, this evening, on purpose to be a sweet, little, tempting morsel (which is just what you look, only not so very little) in the very middle of the path of the future Lord Langley, departing, broken-hearted, from wicked, cruel Marcella Cassilys? And don’t you perceive, that after landing your big fish safe and sound, you deliberately put him back into the water, and that all your mother’s schemes, including inviting me and mamma here, and twenty other contrivances, have all been—it is past words, Flo. There will be an awful scene. Go and get it over, and prepare

your mind for the most dreadful scolding you ever received.'

A little more persuasion and Florelle, very reluctantly, went.

'Poor Florelle,' mused Marcella, 'how her mother will rate her. And so that was the scheme. Aunty is not very dainty about the means to her end. Clever, though. And he really did propose; walked straight into the trap! The great oaf. Aunty knew him better than I. I should not have believed it. Fancy being married to such a man!'

With lagging steps Florelle made her way to her mother's room.

For the last quarter of an hour, too unquiet to be still, Mrs. Curteis had been pacing the chamber, frequently breaking her uneven walk to listen, in vain, for the sound of approaching steps, and to think, 'If she does not come soon, he must somehow have missed her.' 'She will be waiting still in the drawing-room.' 'Marcella is sure to cut her conference short.'

‘Hark!—no. There is no one.’ ‘It cannot have been over before she got there.’ ‘I would stake anything that, if he saw her, he asked her.’ ‘It is just possible she is still with him. Though if he left her, she would perhaps still wait for me in the drawing-room. She is such a baby.’

There was certainly a step now. Florelle’s. She walked slowly. What did that portend? The door opened, and the girl entered, and closing the door stood guilty, colouring, hanging her head. Her mother came to her quickly.

‘My darling!’ she said, taking her hands and stooping to look into her eyes.

The words tempted Florelle to look up. Her eyes were fast filling with tears, and her lips trembled.

‘Tell me, Flo, quick!’ exclaimed her mother in the last stage of impatience.

‘Oh, mamma, I could not help it,’ began Florelle, amid tears, ‘he does not really care for me, and I—*Mamma!* you hurt!’

In her excitement Mrs. Curteis was crushing the girl's hands in her own.

'Silence. Has Mr. Rintearn asked you to marry him?'

'Yes.'

'And you—said?'

'I said—"No."'

Her mother literally threw down her hands.

'You said "No?"—*You refused him?*' she asked in a species of scream.

'I couldn't do—anything—else,' sobbed Flo.

A moment Mrs. Curteis stood motionless. Then she lifted her hand to strike the girl. But as Florelle drew back to shun the blow, the hand raised to give it dropped at her mother's side. Instead of a blow Flo got only,

'We will speak of this presently, Miss Curteis.'

'Oh no, mamma, no, no,' exclaimed Flo, clasping her hands, and filled with fear by the

well-known phrase that meant her mother would at her leisure calculate adequate reprisals, 'Mamma, I did my *duty*.'

'We will speak of it presently. Go. Wait a moment. Remember you will be at dinner this evening, and in the drawing-room, and you will look as if nothing had happened.'

'Yes, mamma.'

Florelle left.

Her mother sank down in the nearest chair. Her hard mouth wore a look of the ruggedness of stone, and the meshed wrinkles of her face defined themselves more sharply, and with a keener cutting of care, but she sat with her broken hope, without motion or murmur. Only after a while two or three tears drew channels on the rugged, anxious cheeks. Then she rose and washed away their traces, and again herself to all outward appearing, went to the drawing-room.

Rintearn was there, talking with Twisden, of poachers. Florelle, secretly faint with fear,

was detailing the formation of some new pudding to one of the lady visitors. Keppel was lauding French literature to Laurier, and racking his thoughts to discover what to be at with 'Jack.'

When the poor go to earn their daily bread, hiding in their own uncared-for hearts their toils, and troubles, and cares, humanity pities, and praises, and pretends to think this kind of thing fine. When the rich play their difficultly balanced parts, hiding in their uncared-for hearts their blows in the battle of life, humanity smiles its pity on the hypocrites. Yet it does not appear that the former display more of self-control than the latter, nor that they are one whit less taught, and led by necessity. Rather that humanity (the sly *paraisseuse*) knows and understands nothing of what is endured by either, but simply has grasped the fact, that the glib repetition of certain phrases gives her lips what is held an attractive mould.

CHAPTER III.

MARCELLA had not misreckoned the effect of her coup. This time, as she had said, she had made an end. And Rintearn felt that it was the end.

Miss Cassilys was not for him.

The stroke broke him.

After the dead blow, and the first mad moment of blundering had passed, the man, to use a figure consonant with the mental experience that passed in him, at once fell, fell, fell, stage after stage, down, down, down, from where his life had been in hope, and some light, to an outer palpable darkness—the sense that he should be *her* husband—never!

The next day those who knew supposed he would make some excuse and leave. But he remained. His invitation extended over a few

days more, and unless Miss Cassilys left he doggedly intended to remain till the last hour possible in her society. Such at least was his answer to Keppel, who, unwearied in urging reason, expostulated in vain.

Marcella breathed with a sense of relief not quite understood by herself, a consciousness of being freed for something as well as from something. In the afternoon she rode with Florelle. The latter chanced to stop on their way to speak with a cottager, and when she overtook Marcella, who had ridden on, found she had reined up on a spur of the hill commanding a view of Wyvenhome, on which she was gazing so deeply immersed in thought, as to be startled by Florelle's speaking.

‘Of what are you musing so deeply, Marcella?’ she asked.

‘We will ride on,’ was the only reply, as Marcella turned her horse's head.

‘Tell me, Marcella, of what you were thinking.’

Marcella shook her head.

‘Not me,’ coaxed Flo, ‘me, *ta camarade?*’

‘No, Flo,’ replied her cousin so decisively that Flo said no more.

In the course of the evening Keppel came to Laurier standing alone and said, ‘Just look at Jack Rintearn, and tell me what you think.’

Rintearn, a short distance from them, was watching Marcella talking to Charley. Laurier looked but made no reply.

‘Well?’ asked Keppel.

‘I see what you have seen. At some moments and in some lights men look not what they are but what they might have been.’

‘You know she has refused him?’

The effect of a burst of light passed over Laurier’s consciousness without any accompanying apprehension of its cause.

‘Between ourselves,’ he replied, ‘I am surprised. I must say I thought the coronet and position and fortune would carry the day. But that is a strange girl.’

‘I wish I knew what her game is ; or how I could get Rintearn out of her way,’ said Keppel.

He left Laurier, and the latter crossed over to Marcella. Charley had left her.

‘Permit me to congratulate you, Miss Cassily,’ he said in an undertone.

‘Me? I think there is some mistake,’ she replied, looking annoyed.

‘I hope not. I should be sorry to hear that you had preferred a coronet to your own philosophy of pleasure—the latter is so far the more original and better.’

She smiled, and looked at him from the corners of her eyes. The faintest tinge of rose had heightened the colour of her cheeks.

‘Your strength is more than I thought it,’ said Laurier in a tone of delicate admiration.

‘You perhaps overrate me.’

‘No. I know where your weakness lies, I have just found it. It is not in mistaking false pleasures and true—but deeper down.’

‘How well you have read me,’ she answered thoughtfully. ‘Tell me,’ her tone changed, ‘there are two sorts of weakness in women, are there not? One that is only despicable, and one that merits help. Tell me, which do you think is mine?’

And she looked at him for his answer.

‘One that merits help, I hope,’ he said a little uncertainly, ‘but the end must prove.’

‘True,’ she rejoined, not without anxiousness, ‘the end must prove.’

That evening as the ladies after dinner came out of the dining-room, Marcella managed unnoticed to slip away from the rest.

For her nature craved solitude, or, more truly, exacted it of her, immediately, imperatively, almost distressingly, and she seemed to have no choice but to obey. Something vague and unknown was awaking within her and restlessly demanded attention to itself.

She selected the library. It was never

entered at night, nor even lighted. Having reached it unobserved she closed the door behind her, and, occasionally groping, found her way to a seat.

The gloom was absolute, and few only, and but muffled sounds from other parts of the house reached her. Yet, as if not even so enough alone, she placed her elbows on the table and covered her face with her hands.

‘Can it be?’ she thought, ‘is it possible?’

‘To help my need, and weakness.

‘There are two kinds of help. One that one would give to all, more or less, as they wanted it. Another—which is like giving oneself.

‘How have I come to see that?’

‘Which is it I would have from him? And which would he give me?’

She took her hands from her face, and drew her fingers through and through between each other.

‘That hard, stern man, who is scarcely

half sure he likes me. He reads my nature well. How uncertain he seems that I shall not fail. I am sure he has seen my strength and my weakness. I wish he would help me.

‘How has all this come to pass? What is it makes me wish I could put myself in that man’s arms? He is in two days going away, and I hate to think of it. It can all mean but one thing—the truth is—this is love.’

Her heart leaped in her bosom with a sudden emotion which came with the acceptance of the truth.

‘So I have fallen in love with Mr. Laurier. Well—I am glad, and proud of it. There is something there, worth one’s love.’

Another long spell of thought, and then very humbly, though not unhopefully,

‘I hope he will love me.’

An evening like any other evening, only in seeming rather quiet, a will to be gentle, a sense of all creation melting into life, a sort of pleasant pain longing indefinitely, a strange

shyness of speech over a dozen indifferent words interchanged with *him*, and Marcella had passed her first hours of conscious love, and softly fallen asleep.

The next day some of the Wyvenhome party visited the ruins of K—— Castle. Of the number were Marcella, and Florelle, Mrs. Curteis in the capacity of chaperone, Laurier, Charley, Tom Twisden, and, whom nobody wanted, Rintearn. They drove over from Wyvenhome before luncheon. A fine morning afforded a delicious drive. Florelle on the box seat, relieved from the fear of a place immediately under her mother's eye, recovered, in the keen air that beat on her cheeks, some of her recently lost spirits.

A custodian who waited on visitors met them on the tortuous path that led from the high road to the castle, an irregular straggling pile, which stood on an abrupt bluff, swept by the curve of a river, an imposing ruin in every stage

of wreck and decay that gunpowder, neglect, and the mere marring and softening of time can produce—a beautiful and melancholy sight of which detailed description is needless. There are none to whom is unknown the spell of ivy-clad ruins,—the frowns of wrinkled, tall, grey walls, topped with tousled ivy, the blind windows, in and out of which all that lists passes wanton as the winds, the lawns that carpet court and bower and hall, the rusting iron and loosening stones, the flower-laden ledges that are passages, which feet no longer tread, the little tossing tufts of ferns in mouldering holes, the mounting, stringy stems that climb the lichened walls, the crumbling steps, and naked, stone-strewn hearths, the wreathing clematis, and desolation's silent eloquence—

Omnia muta,
Omnia sunt deserta, ostentant omnia letum.

From one room,—on an upper storey, grown with grass, and rank weeds crowding among brambles, with mouldering walls, which, pierced

by many shapeless ragged gaps, suggested doors to lead to other chambers long since fallen in—a flight of crumbling steps led, within the thickness of an abutting wall, to the level of its summit. Thence a path, in length some thirty feet, lay along the wall's broad top, to a narrow door in a turret, that contained spiral stairs, and commanded from its summit a dizzy view. The high, strong wall stood alone, stretching along the edge of the cliff, which, where the turret rose, sank sheer down to the rocks by the water.

At the foot of the stairs the conductor stopped the party. To the top of these steps any one might go, and they would find a fine view. Beyond, and into the turret, it was particularly requested no one would venture unaccompanied. If any of the gentlemen (ladies seldom attempted it) wished to go to the top of the turret the conductor would go with two, or at the most three, at a time.

Did any one wish to go?

‘Oh I should doat upon going up to the top

of that tiny tower,' said Florelle; 'I may, mamma, may I not?'

'Say yes, mother,' said Charley, 'Flo will think better of it presently.'

They mounted the long flight of stone steps. At the top was a narrow path not quite straight, amid the grass and ferns that crowned the wall, and a rope that swung in the wind, one end fastened to an iron upright, the other to a staple near the turret door. The breadth of the wall's top was irregular, at places not more than two feet, the sheer height, on one side fifty feet, on the other, what Florelle did not like to look at.

'Well, Flo?' asked Charley.

'I'll go,' replied Flo, becoming pale.

'No you will not, my dear,' said Mrs. Curteis.

'I should like it, though,' replied Florelle, sitting down by her mother, secretly much relieved.

Several of the men went, and returned.

The view was certainly fine : to look over the turret's low parapet ' ticklish.'

' Should you like to go, Marcella ?' asked Mrs. Curteis.

' I think I should.'

' Go, then.'

' You are sure-footed, Miss ?' asked the guide.

She assented, and turning to Charley said, ' Will you come with me ?'

' No, miss,' interposed the cicerone, ' I'll take you alone, if you please.'

When they had entered the turret door, Rintearn, who had stood gloomily listening, followed them.

' You had no right to come here like this, sir,' said the guide civilly, but with authority.

They reached the summit, and he indicated the chief points of view. Marcella approached the parapet to look over.

' You had better not look over, Miss,' said the man.

‘ But I wish to look over, please. Will you hold me?’

The official demurred. Rintearn stepped forward, and, the guide expostulating, taking her firmly by both arms halfway between her elbows and shoulders, stood behind her holding her as she approached the edge, and gazed over at the depth below.

‘ Does it make you dizzy?’ he asked.

‘ The dizziness is passing.’

Suddenly he pushed her forwards.

An appalling, blood-freezing shriek from the top of the turret, brought their hearts into the mouths of every one of the party. Every eye turned with terror to see what had happened. Mrs. Curteis had already noticed how Rintearn stood by Marcella at the turret’s edge, and even in that instant she had time for another feeling besides surprise, and thought of forty thousand pounds.

But nothing had happened. Marcella, Rintearn, and the guide stood on the turret, only

Marcella was no longer peering over the edge.

‘Of course,’ thought Mrs. Curteis, ‘nothing ever does happen to that girl.’

‘The lady became dizzy (she is a little light-headed) and thought she was falling,’ explained Rintearn to the guide.

Still trembling with fear as she was, Marcella turned on him the scorn of her angry eyes, with ‘Liar’ flaming in their pupils.

The cicerone insisted on no longer stay upon the tower, and they descended. Leaning one hand against the outer wall, the other against the newel of the stairs—with her wonted pride she refused assistance—Marcella with difficulty made one step after another. One moment’s horrible tension appeared to have unstrung every nerve in her body. The spiral tower reeled giddily around her, and the mere effort of volition grew to torture. That she would reach the remainder of their party without falling or fainting seemed miserably

impossible. Still she held up as she could, and, in the end, imperious resolve vanquished the seemingly endless steps; the narrow path on the wall's top was traversed, and safe footing at last securely reached. Not a word had been spoken.

Florelle was seated in a large moss-grown hollow of the ruined wall, and Marcella sat down beside her. Inwardly thankful to a degree beyond expression, she quietly took off her hat and, partly for a diversion, partly to cover the still distressful excitement of her nerves, began unconcernedly to dust from it some dirt and dust its feathers had brushed off the walls of the tower. But now she was in security, the sickly vertigo, as if by reaction, cleared from her brain almost at a stroke, and she found herself at once able to join in the conversation, and to reply with a jest to a jest of Twisden's respecting the 'appalling shriek' by which she had alarmed them.

Questions were naturally many. To all Miss Cassilys made the same reply, 'Mr. Rintearn said I became dizzy, and thought I was falling.' Only Florelle insisted, 'But did you become dizzy?' To which she received no answer.

Then the party rose to proceed to another part of the ruin. Holding in her hand her hat, more soiled than she at first supposed, Marcella slowly descended the long flight of steps, frequently stopping to pick out some little morsel of plaster or whitewash from her feathers. In consequence, by the time the foot of the stairs was reached, she was some yards behind the last of the party.

She lifted her eyes a moment to observe them passing before her in straggling order across the large weed-grown chamber, towards the same door by which they had entered it, and then—now more at her ease, the way being level—leisurely followed, flicking some last little specks of dust from her hat. Then

she raised it in her hands to replace it on her head.

As she did so, looking up, she became aware of Rintearn, standing some ten yards in front of her, at a short distance before the archway by which she should leave the room, with his arms crossed, watching her approach. Instinctively one hand holding her hat fell to her side, the other on her bosom, and she stopped.

‘That is quite right, Marcella,’ said Rintearn, nodding familiarly, and speaking in a tone half supercilious, half condescending. ‘You and I have something to say to each other; we are going to discuss a little reason, and you cannot proceed until we have finished.’

The girl’s reply was an immediate step in the direction of the exit.

Rintearn moved forwards a step to meet her, and held out his cane across her path, in a manner that signified it was interdicted.

‘I wish to pass, sir, if you please.’

She was already within a foot of his cane.

‘I am not going to permit you to pass.’

‘I request you.’

‘I have told you I shall not permit you to pass.’ His tone was hard and determined.

Marcella put forward her hand to push the cane aside. In his iron grip it offered a resistance that surprised her. At the same time he said warningly,

‘Do not compel me to use force, please. I shall not, in any case, permit you to pass until you have heard what I have to say, and answered it.’

There was on Marcella’s part a moment of hesitation, then she said,

‘As you are a gentleman, sir, I request your permission to go to my chaperone.’

‘And I refuse it’—firmly.

‘I have no choice, then.’

She stepped back some yard and a half, and taking a long breath, looked into his face

an indignant question of what might come next.

‘That is so, exactly,’ returned Rintearn; ‘you have no choice.’ He dropped the point of his cane, and continued, ‘Now, you perceive that when it comes to a question of *strength*, I am master of the situation—as just now on the top of that little tower.’

‘Why did you not throw me down whilst you were about it?’ asked Marcella, meditatively.

‘Ah, that is just it. Now we come to the question. I did not throw you down, for several reasons. Not for any fear of the consequences, be quite sure of that (you have effectually cured me of the fear of consequences); but, first, because it happens to be my intention, Marcella, that you shall remain alive; secondly, because I had no further desire than to give you a really good fright, with a view of ascertaining whether that magnificent indifference to distress, to which I was treated

the evening before last, was more than skin deep, which, it now appears to me, at least, when you yourself are concerned, it is not ; and lastly, because I desire you to understand that I am not one of those dandies on whom you have found it so amusing to trample whenever it has entertained your vanity to do so, but a man of another kind, not easily humbugged, and not to be turned by words from my purpose.'

The girl's head moved impatiently, but she said nothing.

'Now, Marcella ——'

'Will you be so kind as to address me as Miss Cassilys, if you please?'

He looked into her face, and laughed and shook his head.

'Now, *Marcella*,' he recommenced in his most determined and really impressive voice ; 'you, because I love you, have elected to have me for a *foe* ——'

'Excuse me,' interrupted the girl quickly,

‘you misrepresent me. I entertain no such wish. Nor have I any foes—except those who *choose* to be foes to me.’

‘Excuse *me*, those are always our foes whom our conduct *compels* to become so.’

Marcella opened her eyes a little. Rintearn was not wont to attempt epigram even in its weakest form. As she, however, said nothing, he went on,

‘You seem to think what I say strange. Perhaps that appears to you but a practised coquette’s common cruelty with which I was *thrust* away by you, to be,’ his speech grew tremulous, ‘the one man who is to have no hope, whose respect is to be counted for an insult. I wish you rather more clearly to understand what man it is of whom you have so insouciantly tried to make a pariah, but——’

He stopped abruptly, and his voice and mien changed to a sudden deprecation.

‘Miss Cassilys—I—I beg your pardon. I am exceedingly sorry. I would give my life

with gladness to save you from harm. But—there is that of devil in me, if you but knew it. Marcella, is it nothing to you? Why should you make me mad? You for whom I could be different from what I am; you, who, if you would, could save me.—Marcella!’

He made two or three steps towards her. But as he came nearer she drew back.

‘No nearer, sir, if you please,’ fell from her lips forbiddingly.

He stopped, and she, seeing it, retreated no farther, but stood, drawn up to her full height, motionless, watching, her fine features set, and her imperious eyes fixed in a cold, repellent gaze. She had taken her dress in her hand to make her movements more free, and its lifted skirt displayed her delicate ankles and little feet, whilst the breeze that blew in her face drove back her dress close to her figure, and catching her fine, loose hair, tossed its locks in the afternoon light. About her the surroundings of ruin and rankling weed lent a weird force to her

pitiless beauty, such that imagination might have conceived her rather some spirit of dilapidation than anything mortal ; a thing, not of natural breath, created to lure to death among sinking floors, crumbling vaultings, and steps that gave way as in dreams, the mortals whose recklessness dared intrusion into her haunts.

And Rintearn stood and gazed on her as if beneath the spell of some such fascination.

‘In short it is indifferent to you what becomes of me,’ he at length exclaimed.

She made him no answer.

‘Miss Cassilys!’ he insisted, beseechingly.

‘I cannot see,’ she said, speaking slowly, and as if the ideas filtered through her thought as she spoke, ‘that my life, for it comes to that, is with any justice asked as a ransom for yours : neither do I believe in the power you surmise my nature has over yours. I think,’—she paused, and in another voice concluded with resolution, ‘You are not entitled to a knowledge of my thoughts.’

The man turned his head aside impatiently.

‘Then it is war,’ he said, resuming his former tone. ‘Very well. Then, understand me. As I am refused your love—I will have—your dishonour.’

‘Sir! This is past insult,’ burst passionately from the maiden’s lips, as she gasped for breath, whilst her outraged modesty crimsoned her cheeks and neck. ‘I *will* go, sir; let me pass, this instant.’

He had again extended his cane to arrest her.

‘Your answer,’ he said quietly and firmly, ‘then you shall go.’

She stood chewing her lip, and turning away her eyes; but still even then, excited as she was, calling back her self-composure.

‘There is no answer to words such as yours,’ she answered at length curtly.

‘I require an answer, Marcella. When it is given you shall go. Do you accept my challenge, or decline it?’

She turned her face to him, paling in anger.

‘Challenge; accept; decline!’ she said slowly; ‘I, a gentlewoman! Do you think I resemble yourself? If you must have an answer, tell yourself what must be my thoughts of you from this hour forth for ever.’

She pushed aside the cane, his unnerved will scarcely resisting the careless pressure of her hand, and walking past, left him alone.

Slowly his head drooped. The cane fell from his loosened hand to the ground, and his eyes sank to the grass at his feet. So he stood long. Once only he looked up towards the spot where she had stood, perhaps to picture her in his mind.

Then with a sudden movement he drew himself together, hastily picked up his cane from the ground, and, with an appearance of some deliberate resolve, walked quickly away.

The party leaving the castle learned that he had preceded them on the road home ; and, on their reaching Wyvenhome, that he had already left.

CHAPTER IV.

It was Laurier musing, that evening, in the drawing-room at Wyvenhome.

‘ Yes, there undoubtedly is much in Miss Cassilys.—A very great beauty, when one has learned to see it, one of uncommon lines ; a faultless health, and graceful strength ; a clear, sensitive brain ;—and, then, this way she has of sunning herself, like a divinity, in the light of her own life ; with her lips fearlessly dipped to drink in the great sea of pleasure ;—a something wondrously truthful, too, in those great dark-grey eyes.—And here she comes.’

He was sitting near one of the windows, a little apart. He and Keppel had been speaking there of Rintearn, surmising where he might be gone, which neither knew. Keppel had

left him impressed by his concern for Rintearn, and by his cool judgment in circumstances that evidently moved him not lightly. Afterwards, somehow, Marcella had glided unobserved into his mind and occupied it.

She now came to the window, and, having unfastened it, opened it about an inch and stole a peep at the night without.

‘What magnificent starlight,’ she said, ‘I should very much like to slip out and take a stroll under the stars.’

‘And so should I,’ rejoined Laurier, who had risen and now stood at her side; ‘here it is this evening unusually dull. Outside the night is mild, and a stroll on the terrace would be delightful.’

‘Come,’ said Marcella.

In an instant she had slipped out and he had followed her, closing the window behind them.

‘Wait for me here a moment,’ said Marcella, ‘I am going to run round to the hall,

and to get something to put over my shoulders.'

And catching up the train of her dress, she literally ran down the path and around the corner of the house, from whence she returned in a short time, at a more demure pace, with a light cloud prettily wrapped about her shoulders, and drawn like a hood over her head.

'We will go to the western terrace,' she said.

Laurier turned to walk with her. After a few steps he stumbled on the tiles edging a flower-bed.

'Take care, Mr. Laurier,' exclaimed Marcella, 'or you will fall. See'—she came nearer him—'you do not know the place so well as I. Let me take your arm, and I will lead you. So.' She slipped her arm within his, and continued, 'Fancy my leading you! You who are so far more capable in every sense to lead me.'

'I am not so certain of that, Miss Cassilys.'

‘Oh, but I am.’ They had reached the steps, and she said, ‘Here are the steps, now count eight.—There. Now, this way. There is a little path here. You really are very tractable. And now—oh, look!’

They had arrived at a place by the balustrade, in front of the trees, where the whole splendour of the star-strewn heavens lay opened before them. The night was breathlessly still, and silent with the profound silence of the country.

Marcella slowly withdrew her arm from Laurier’s, but she still remained close beside him, the wraps about her shoulders brushing against his. With a common instinct the two raised their eyes to the panorama of stars.

Love changes all. In that contemplation, unique among all that men can see, the silent moving of the nightly sky, each of these two was conscious of a thought of hitherto unknown intensity, which two words may tell best, ‘With him!’ ‘With her!’

But she interrupts his thought with a question, which somehow the stars have suggested,

‘What do you think, Mr. Laurier, of mere play of fancy, when it is quite unreal ; it seems one of the pleasures of life, yet I never feel altogether sure of it?’

‘What, pray, are you fancying?’

‘I? Nothing. Only a thing came into my mind I once read I do not know where. That people who could love each other and do not are after death sent to stars so far apart that it takes millions of years for the light from one to reach the other.’

‘You believe that?’

‘Of course not. One thinks of such things : one does not believe them.’

Will he ask, ‘Shall you and I be so exiled?’ No. Neither has it crossed her mind that he might. But he has thought it, is thinking it.

‘How beautiful ! How divinely beautiful !’ whispered Marcella, as if loth to break the

eloquent silence of the night, ‘and how I do love it. I have always loved my life, but to-night it seems to me that I know its worth better than ever : I have, only to-day, so nearly lost it.’

‘On that turret. You should not have ventured there, Miss Cassilys.’

She turned her face, it was very close to his, and for a moment regarded him.

‘You, too!’ she said, again turning away her eyes. ‘Strange, how ready every one is to believe me hopelessly weak. I wonder what you would say if you knew the truth?’ She paused an instant and continued, ‘It was Mr. Rintearn. He was holding my arms, you know, for though I am now sure I could have looked over the edge without danger of dizziness, I was not sure of it before I had tried. All of a sudden he gave me so violent a jerk forwards that I lost my balance, and, in fact, I was falling, and cannot imagine how I recovered myself. Of course he only meant to

frighten me—in which he succeeded—but I am convinced that it was only by accident that his practical joke did not bring me to an end too awful to think of.’

‘Miss Cassilys!’ exclaimed Laurier amazed.

‘And then, you heard, I screamed. That makes me fear there is more of the coward in me than I supposed. Only, when I believed I was going to fall from all that height on those terrible rocks!—Still, if there be any shame after death, I should have been ashamed now, to have died screaming. Should not you?’

‘The idea that any man should have put that freezing terror upon *you*!’ was his only reply.

But its tone told what made her cheeks crimson.

The blush fled in a moment, as it had come, and an odd coolness succeeded it.

It included that *penchant* to play the coquette which never deserts a girl of spirited feelings, above all with the man for

whom she has conceived an attachment, an inclination that fails only when the supreme word falls on her ears that scatters to the six extremities of space the thoughts of every woman that loves.

Now she replied with a kind of insouciance, 'On me? Yes. But then, you know, the man who did it is in love: and one expects men under those circumstances to do odd things. I am unwilling to leave this glorious sight, but I think we ought to go back. Will you again have my guidance?'

'Thanks,' replied Laurier, coldly, 'I think I can see my way.'

He had taken a warning.

But the next moment, repenting of the loss of one touch of hers, he said, in another tone, 'But it is so dark under the trees. Will you not take my arm? You might stumble.'

'No, thank you!'—as coldly as he.

They returned into the shade under the trees without speaking.

‘Is that true, Miss Cassilys,’ asked Laurier, walking at a little distance from her side, ‘which some people say, that you are as much misanthrope as I misogynist?’

‘No : very false,’ her voice had a certain hardness, ‘and I am surprised that *you* should have listened to what gossip had to say of me. I should like to know whether my frankness with you has merited that, or whether it is only the way you judged the best one to decipher me?’

‘Neither. I beg your pardon. I am a little nonsensical to-night.’

His voice, usually so even, seemed to change with every speech he made, almost in every phrase.

‘You mean you are cross,’ replied Marcella, ‘and with me, who have done nothing to deserve it. Now give me your arm, and don’t be ill-natured. I see you can hardly find your way.’

He complied, and almost at the same in-

stant the sound of the explosion of a gun, or pistol, from the direction of the house made Marcella press closer to him, with a start.

‘What was that?’ she exclaimed.

‘A gun somewhere.’

‘But who can be shooting at this time? I hope it is not one of these frays with the poachers. Listen.’

All was still.

‘It is nothing,’ said Laurier, and they walked on in silence, except for the sound of their steps on the gravel, and the faintest rustle of Marcella’s *satin merveilleux*.

‘You know I go to-morrow,’ presently said Laurier, in one of his unnatural ways.

‘Yes. You told me. I am sorry’—encouragingly.

‘Thanks. My visit is near its end—and our brief acquaintance,’ he spoke still in the same forced tone.

‘Why! are we not to meet again?’

‘It is improbable, is it not, Miss Cassilys—and—perhaps undesirable.’

‘I do not see why. Mamma and I live in town. If mamma invite you, you will come and see us, I hope.’

‘You are very kind.’

They had reached the door. He opened it for her to enter, and followed her into the hall. She slipped off her cloud, and having thrown it aside stood before the glass in the hat-stand smoothing her hair with her hands. Laurier sat in the nearest chair, and, nervously stroking his moustache, leaned back admiring the process. Presently Marcella looked round and down at him and smiled.

‘Do you think me mad to-night, Miss Cassilys?’ he asked, returning the smile.

‘I think you unlike yourself. What has happened?’

‘Nothing.’

‘That is not true. Why will you not tell me?’

‘Because I am certain I should affront you.’

‘Have I ever yet been affronted at your telling me the truth?’

‘Suppose we go to the drawing-room,’ he replied, rising, for Marcella had finished smoothing her hair and adjusting her laces and ruffles.

‘Very well,’ she assented, pleasantly, ‘I am sorry you cannot trust me.’

As they crossed the hall a servant met them with letters on a salver. They were for Laurier. He glanced at the directions and thrust them into his pocket saying, ‘Only business.’

‘Well, and what better could you hear about?’ replied Marcella, brightly. ‘I wish you success, and no end of fees.’

‘The sensible girl!’ thought Laurier. ‘What an ass she would think me if she only suspected me of being more than half in love with her, as I verily believe I am.’

It is not difficult to fall in love, but to know when one has done so is almost impossible.

In the drawing-room all tongues were discussing the mysterious shot, which, to judge from its sound, had been fired inside the house. Mr. Curteis and Charley were gone to make investigations, but returned without an explanation. A French pistol, a present from Marcella to Charley, was missing from its place in the gun-room, but it was not probable that that had anything to do with the matter.

Marcella had placed herself beside her mother. Under cover of the general conversation she said,

‘Mr. Laurier leaves to-morrow. I am sure if you could persuade aunty to ask him to stay a few days longer he would accept the invitation with pleasure.’

‘I’ll speak to your aunt, Marcella,’ replied Mrs. Cassilys; ‘I have no doubt I shall persuade her.’

And as the girl walked away again she looked after her and smiled.

For the rest of the evening Marcella kept away from Laurier. The instinct that swayed her to do so was correct. Approach between them for the present was premature. The man wanted time to understand his own mind about her—and he wanted nothing more. In two or three days their case would have been very different. Unhappily the assistance of those two or three days was what Marcella was not to have.

CHAPTER V.

ALONG a country road, from a small station ten miles distant from Wyvenhome, strides Rintearn.

The way is long, rough, lonely, strange : but, at last, there below him, among the blackness of the trees darker than that of the night, recognisable by the sparkling of a light here and there in the windows, lies Wyvenhome.

So the end is not far now.

He lights a fusee. A quarter past nine. A sharp walk, almost five miles in the last hour. Another half-hour will bring him to the house ; less, for the road runs down hill.

On again ; and the same tearing pace. Over the common, through the pines, across

the spinet. If he should come upon one of the gamekeepers watching for poachers? Perhaps it would be a good thing for him.

But he does not ; and he traverses, in rapid succession, the rest of the woods, the park, the road to the house. Here is the terrace. Now, a moment to think !

Think of what? There is nothing to be gained by thinking—nor to be lost. Nothing! Ahead then !

Yet he does think of a thing, remembered from some dinner-table conversation ; remembered, because he tried and was never able to see its point, how a man wrote himself an epitaph to the effect

‘ What I spent, I had :
What I saved, I lost :
What I lost, I spent—’

‘ No ; that last line is wrong. To mend it, then—“ What I had, I lost ; What I wanted, I never got ! ” ’ And he laughed to himself a loud, rude laugh.

Thinking is nonsense.

Only, had he stopped to think, he would have met Marcella with Laurier coming out on the terrace.

Here is the door of the house. He opens it. No one is about. The hall is crossed, and he commences the ascent of the broad, shallow stairs.

There is music in the drawing-room. No musician, he still knows that touch. He stops on the stairs to catch the sounds. He is reckless—why not?—of discovery. It is some triumphant strain, and Marcella is dashing into its rhythm all the sunny gladness of her soul. So angels sing whilst men go damn.

The music ends. Its last grand chord dies. All ends. All die. He mounts the stairs slowly, one by one, and through one passage comes into another wherein is only one, a well-remembered door.

Is it locked? Not it. To some men fortune gives never one chance. He opens it, enters, closes the door behind him.

A light—he has matches.

So this is *her* room, the presence-chamber of her private inner life, that he shall know of never, never, never.

He stands by the hearth, repeating to himself, ‘Never! never! never! never!’

How awful a thing the impossible is to the man who cannot bend! It is like the haggard impassable cliff, on to which a great wave rolls, toiling many a lonely league, gathering strength, mounting in weight, tossing its crest in the spiriting breezes, pressing forwards, resolute, not to be turned, till it comes roaring up to the encounter, unflinching, unblenching lifts its mad rage, and then, with a crash, down comes the blow; the drear rock shudders to its core, up flies the water to the trembling stars—but there is no more wave.

The room is very neat. There, on a little stand on her dressing-table, are the earrings she wore this morning when he insulted her.

Insulted her!

Yes : that is so. Why think of it? All the little thinking needful was got through in the train, and much good it was! Thought of loss, loss, nothing but loss, and defeat insufferable. Mother lost—love lost—fidelity lost, to Florelle—honour lost—hope lost—a frightful thought of a crime, of the blackest, that might have been done, lost—after which thought all were better lost—she, *she*, utterly lost—himself lost—and left nothingness.

He sits on the bed. Here she has lain and slept. And here he will do it.

It is a hideous crime. At least men say so. One not greater would bring down all her pride to the dust. But he is not going to think. Here is the pistol. Her present to Charley. The click of the cock. No more thought.

The coldness of the muzzle to his temple, of the trigger on his finger.—The tightening of the muscles of one hand.

A crashing, smashing blow.

And afterwards——

CHAPTER VI.

IN the wicker arm-chair in his bedroom, with his hands on his leg laid across his knee, Laurier sat and mused. The letters he had received lay by his side and divided his thought with Miss Cassilys.

It was a question of an important case, for which he was retained, at once an opportunity and an evidence of the opinion held of his abilities.

In a returning current, his thoughts began to flow back into their old accustomed channels. Gradually he returned into unison with past unruffled years of steady, mental toil, with the patiently stored knowledge and experience, with the all that was characteristically professional. Old ambitions woke again from holiday

slumbers, strong, definite, impatient of delays, and mantled in his second nature, the man returned to be no longer merely a man, but an aspiring 'man of law.'

And from such a man's attention vanished fast idle recollections, the tourist-laden boat, slow foreign trains, chance fellow-passengers, the quiet French country roads, sights, pictures, sculptures, more recent sport, the English autumn woods and fields, and thoughtless evening's idleness, a parcel of things, in view of ambitions, not worthy of remembrance.

He found himself in the very humour for work. The holiday weeks had been expended better than he had thought in gathering so sharp a mental freshness. But now he would waste no more valuable days. All ambition's avarice of time was upon him. To-morrow the earliest train should take him back to town. Many things, long proposed, should be done before sittings commenced, and then he would see whether he could not before Christmas

definitely advance his position. Those whose quiet lives from year to year pursue one even tenor have no conception of the nerving, energising effect of such thoughts on men of ambition, and beneath their influence Laurier quickly underwent a kind of metamorphosis, at least intellectually.

His point of view changed. There are three ways of thinking—like men, like women, like professionals. In whichever way one thinks, he or she stands aside, and regards other modes of thought as vague and unreal. So Laurier now stood aside from the thought of the Laurier of two hours ago.

‘And Miss Cassilys?’ he soliloquised. ‘Ah, I have very nearly committed myself. Now, Mr. Guy Laurier, what is it you have been doing?’

‘I have met an exceedingly handsome woman—woman—ah, an abyss of which no man ever yet sounded the depth.’

‘Marcella Cassilys! It is not just to put

her in the same category with some of her sex. I confess I like "La Marcelle."

'That is not the question. A handsome woman, of an unusually seductive kind, who, I am duly warned, considers a man who does not admire her a mistake.—Was it Keppel said that? I like Keppel; but I do not think he always speaks the truth.

'I am, however, certain a time was when I did not admire—Marcella. And—Marcella knew it. Afterwards—she made me admire her? Yes.

'How? Why?—There is in her a good deal to admire. A girl made of sterling stuff, a goodly scrap of humanity, with an honest, fearless soul. Curteis was right. Marcella is a character a man may justly admire.

'Keppel would say she took care to make me see that. If she did?

'So we became "friends." That is nonsense. A handsome woman has no friends—of either sex. Still, we became "friends." She has brains. We exchange a number of

notions. I learn some things from her, some things altogether differing from any I have learned from men. She learned, I think, some things from me. All very well. Then——

‘ Well then I, like an ass, begin to fall in love: and Miss Cassilys has the sense, on the first indication, promptly to let me understand that will not do.

‘ Certainly not. It will not do. I have no intention of falling in love, no intention of proposing for any woman’s hand, no intention of marrying. Also, I have known this young lady some three weeks; realised not yet a dozen hours that I am smitten; and have already had the impertinence to suffer her to see it.

‘ Under which circumstances she has behaved, as I should have anticipated, well.

‘ So, in addition to other things, Miss Cassilys has taught me a humiliating but salutary lesson of myself, that I am as capable as any other man to make a fool of myself over a good-looking girl.

‘Had I not been a fool I might have added to the number of my acquaintances an agreeable and accomplished woman. As it is, I have to instruct myself to drop her acquaintance.

‘I have little doubt I shall manage that without any very great difficulty. I think I know how to say “No” to myself. I have often enough, regarding other matters, done so already. Happily, there has not been much harm done—thanks to Miss Marcella. She has showed more sense than I.

‘Also, as she has hinted, she must be a good deal disappointed in me. I don’t blame her. I am a good deal disappointed in myself.’

His lips compressed themselves with all the hardness of his own hard lined character.

About the same time Marcella, having bidden her mother good-night, with her light in her hand and a morning-dress they had

together been trimming thrown over her arm, was preparing to leave Mrs. Cassilys's room to go to her own. She took a few steps towards the door, and then, making an abrupt halt, looked back to where her mother sat in the corner of the sofa reading.

‘Dear mamma,’ thought the girl, ‘I am sure it is only just and loving to tell her.’

She laid the dress she bore across the back of a chair, and returning set down the light on the table.

‘Mother,’ in a clear gentle voice, fell on Mrs. Cassilys's ear.

‘Yes, love,’ she replied, looking up.

‘Put down your book, mamma. I have something to tell you.’

The book was set aside. Marcella placed herself at the other end of the sofa, and laying her arm along its back, looked straight into her mother's face, and without falter, but not without a faint blush, asked,

‘Can you guess?’

A sparkle of victory lurked in her still eyes, a softness about the outlines of her lips. Mrs. Cassilys noticed both, but keeping any surmises she might have formed secret, said,

‘I can see something has happened, but I cannot divine what, Marcella.’

Without moving, Marcella said, ‘I have fallen desperately in love!’

Her mother looked at her long. Then she rose, and approaching the girl, bent over her uplifted face, kissing her on the forehead, and saying, as with the back of her fingers she stroked the girl’s warm cheek,

‘I wish your love all happiness, Marcella, my good, open-hearted girl.’

‘You will be surprised when you hear who it is, mamma—Mr. Laurier.’

‘Then, my dear, your husband will be a handsome, clever, and agreeable man, and, if you do your duty, very fond of you.’

‘Oh, mamma,’ said Marcella, catching Mrs.

Cassilys's hand and kissing it, 'I do love you for speaking so of him.'

'Only remember, lassie, you must be, and never cease to be, a woman in a hundred thousand to satisfy that man's ideal.'

'His ideal! Oh, I fear his ideal woman is a very poor creature. But I hope to teach him better.'

'Ah!—Has it then never occurred to you, Marcella, that his idea of what a woman should be is so high that no woman satisfies it, and that he cannot forgive them for it?'

'I never thought of that,' replied Marcella, whilst her eyelids drooped reflectively. 'It would explain some things. He shall not find me wanting though, I think. I would face death among torments for him.'

'Life among common temptations is what you will have to face, Marcella; still it will be for him. Be just and gentle, lassie, and you will master it. Of course you know he loves you.'

‘ I am sure of it, though he has not told me so.’

‘ How long do you think he has loved you, I wonder ? ’ inquired Mrs. Cassilys, with a mischievous smile.

‘ Only quite lately, mamma.’

‘ Ah, love is very blind, Marcella. You have both been in love, my girl, since the day you lent him your French book.’

A few more words, and with a light kiss, and ‘ Good-night, best of mammas,’ Marcella was gone.

Mrs. Cassilys remained still, gazing at the door whence she had issued. Her handsome features wore a heavy look. Not love alone, as with her daughter, was the matter of her thought, but love, and loss, and learning to be left.

Marcella went somewhat slowly towards her room, musing of the height the man she loved was above her poor conception of him. Dreaming still of which she opened the door,

and, bearing a light in her hand, did not, in consequence, at the first instant notice the light in the room. She had advanced several steps into it before she looked about her.

Then with a start she perceived the lights burning, and a man's figure tumbled on her bed.

The moment she became aware of it she averted her face, and, lightly turning on her heel, on the spot passed again from the chamber. She closed the door, almost noiselessly, and, the dress on her arm quickly deposited on the floor, directed her steps to her uncle's room.

Mr. Curteis was undressing. Her knock interrupted him, and her voice, 'It is I, Marcella, uncle. I want you, you yourself, at once.'

When he came out she was waiting, at a little distance, in the passage. She exhibited no appearance of alarm, and spoke with little concern.

‘I have been talking long with mamma,’ she said, ‘and only just now went to my room. There is a man there, on my bed, asleep I suppose, intoxicated I should imagine.’

Mr. Curteis summoned one of the men-servants, and, bidding Marcella wait in the drawing-room, with him went to her chamber.

It was well Marcella had not seen, nor even risked the chance of seeing, what manner of spectacle was in her room ; what was splashed on walls, floor, furniture, curtains, and even on her own jewels and gloves on the table, nor the horrible piece of a man’s head that hung over one side of the bed, above the stains on the quilt, and the pool of blood on the floor, at the side of the bed remote from the door.

Mr. Curteis was fain to catch for support at the bedstead which shook in his grasp, and even then, ashen of hue and faint, turned away his eyes, as he said,

‘I cannot look at this. Here, John, come out of the room.’

‘But Lord, sir!’ said the menial, with mouth and eyes gaping surprise, ‘who’d have thought she’d have *shot* un. There’s the pistol too she’s done it with on the bed. And, Lord, sir, he’s warm still!’

‘Don’t touch anything,’ said Mr. Curteis commandingly, ‘and come out of the room.’

He had himself quitted the chamber, but the lower nature must glut its eyes, and making a frightful grimace, and lifting his hands, the man-servant crawled to take one nearer look, before he followed his master from the room.

‘Well, sir,’ he said, ‘I always knew Miss Cassilys was *one*, but I didn’t think she’d do that.’

‘You hold your tongue, John, and go and fetch me Mr. Charley and Mr. Keppel and Thomas.’ The man took a few steps, and Mr. Curteis added, ‘And Mr. Laurier.’

Laurier had concluded his soliloquies, and, in excellent spirits with himself, was engaged

in preparatory arrangements for his departure on the morrow.

A noisy knock of some dozen raps, accompanied by, 'Hi, sir! hi! hi, sir!' sounded at his door.

'Hulloa!' replied Laurier, 'who is that?'

'Are you gone to bed, sir?'

'No,' said Laurier coming to the door, and opening it, and, as he looked with surprise into the man-servant's scared face, inquiring, 'Why, what has happened?'

'Miss Cassilys has shot Mr. Rintearn, sir!'

'What!' exclaimed Laurier.

'Miss Cassilys, sir, has shot Mr. Rintearn—in her bedroom, sir' (this in a lower tone). 'He's lying right across the bed, and the pistol she's done it with by his side, and his brains blowed out all over the room.'

Laurier was coming, with the man, along the corridor.

'And Miss Cassilys shot him? How do you know that?'

‘He’s in her room, sir. And she’s *one*, sir. Though there’s none of us thought she’d do that.’

‘Could it be possible?’ thought Laurier, and his mind misgave him, for the girl, and for what might befall.

At the head of the stairs, Charley, as he came along completing a hurried semi-costume, and Keppel in clean shirt-sleeves, neat and calm, as always, met him.

Charley’s first word was, ‘Will they try Marcella?’

Keppel laid his hand on Laurier’s arm and said, ‘I’m glad you are here, Mr. Laurier. I have no wish to be the only cool head in this.’

And cool he was. It was he who, as soon as the door was reached, outside which Mr. Curteis stood shivering, said, ‘If you, Mr. Curteis and Mr. Laurier, agree with me that there is no occasion for any one to enter here, will it not be better to lock the room until the

police come?' He it was who, on their assent, entered, took the key, locked the door, and gave the key into Mr. Curteis's hands. It was he who scared John's blabbing tongue into silence; he who, when the question was asked, 'Who should tell Miss Cassilys,' promptly said, 'No one. Tell the girl she cannot come to her own room to-night, but must sleep with her mother;' he who had on the spot looked at his watch and knew the exact minute when he was summoned; he who noticed Marcella's dress lying in the passage, and forbade its removal till after the police had seen it there.

In the drawing-room Laurier contrived to take down Marcella's evidence, whilst all was still fresh in her memory, without letting her suspect what had taken place, not, however, without some surprise on her part and inquiries, to which he replied, 'It was a disgraceful affair, and as there must be investigations, they wished to do what would be ultimately least painful to her.' Her evidence had exactly

the nature he had once anticipated, simple, clear, stamped with unquestionable truthfulness. For her sake, greatly relieved to find what its character was, he was nevertheless cold, and on his guard with her, whilst taking it. The man of a few hours before was changed. In the middle Charley came in, in his great coat, and, with his whip in his hand, bearing a message from his father that Marcella should sleep in her mother's room, and could not fetch anything from her own. Her hearty 'Good-night' in conclusion failed to elicit from Laurier more than a faint smile and a courteous reply; and much mystified, and yet more pained at a something that had hurt her, though she could not call it unkindness, in his manner, Marcella returned at length to Mrs. Cassilys's room.

Charley drove off to fetch the police; one of the men-servants for a surgeon. Laurier remained with Keppel, who had, by tacit consent, assumed a kind of authority, and with

Mr. Curteis received the medical man and the police when they arrived.

‘I’m glad you are here, Mr. Laurier,’ he said from time to time. ‘This is a shocking affair, shocking!’ And then he bit his thin under lip, the only token of emotion he displayed.

As for Mr. Curteis, having said, at the outset, ‘Mr. Keppel, consider everything at your disposal; do whatever seems to you right, and, if you need me, send to my room,’ he went to his own den, and except when summoned with, ‘Mr. Keppel wants you, sir,’ replied to all comers, ‘Don’t come here asking me questions.’ In the interim, he smoked, read the ‘Field,’ and occasionally dozed.

In her bed Mrs. Curteis tossed to and fro telling herself the affair was no fault of hers. But her conscience would not be divested of some tormenting disquiet. The tortured are easily cruel, and in the morning, as soon as light broke, she rose and sent for Florelle.

Flo, aroused from her sleep, came in her peignoir, her plentiful golden hair rolled up in loose masses.

‘Oh, mamma!’ she exclaimed, stopping abruptly in the middle of the room, and clasping her white hands on her bosom, as her eyes opened wide with alarm to see her mother’s terrible face, ‘are you ill, mamma?’

‘Come here, child,’ commanded Mrs. Curteis.

The girl obeyed, slowly, with fear.

When she was near enough her mother took her wrists and, forcing her to a nearer approach, said in a hollow voice,

‘Now listen.’ She proceeded slowly and in a way it was not possible not to understand, and the paling face of the trembling, terrified child, shrinking back so far as the length of her arms would allow, showed only too plainly, how clearly she understood, ‘The man *you* refused to marry—Mr. Rintearn—has—*blown out his brains—in despair—last night—his corpse* is upstairs—it is a horrible sight—and

poetry, history, romance, and none love to read of it more than the best of them. Marcella was no exception; and to her thinking no love was ever told like that of Dante for Beatrice.

Now and again the page remained unturned, as deep reveries would rise out of the meaning of single lines. For what does the world contain which a woman would know in preference to how a great man loves? But Marcella was often baffled, and went on again with the thought, 'To understand one must have loved, and I have never loved.'

When the others returned, the book was finished, but she was still musing over it. Mrs. Cassilys stayed in the room but a minute. Florelle remained crouched by the fire.

'I am so cold, Marcella,' she said, 'and we have been so hideously dull. It is strange that some people cannot be agreeable even when they have agreeable things to say. How have you spent the evening?'

‘Dining, reading, thinking, making discoveries.’

‘What have you discovered? please tell me. I feel so dreadfully in want of something to amuse me.’

Florelle moved from her seat, and taking her place on the floor at Marcella’s feet, leaned her pretty head against her knees, like a tired child, whilst her eyes gazed on the fire.

‘Do you really care to hear?’ said her cousin, putting aside the book. ‘Well then.—To think well a woman should be well dressed.—To judge a man you must know the secrets not only of his thoughts, but of his misfortunes.—To understand some books you must have led a particular kind of life.—Girls such as you and I are to blame if we are not very happy girls.’

‘I am not happy,’ said Florelle. ‘Dear me! it is only four days before we go back to Wyvenhome. I wish I could always stay here. Even then I should not be happy, though, because I have a bad nature.’ Her tone

‘You shall not see Mr. Rintearn, Flo. I promise you, faithfully,’ said Charley kindly, coaxing her hand with his, ‘Come, Flo, you can trust Charley.’

‘Oh, Charley, take me quite, quite away,’ pleaded the poor child, rising now, and clasping her hands upon his shoulder, ‘kind Charley, take me quite away.’

‘I’ll take her down to Scobble’s Farm, father,’ said Charley. ‘Run up the back stairs, Flo, get on your riding things, and come round to the stables, as fast as you can. I’ll have everything ready.’

Flo nodded assent and ran off.

‘By Jove, but I *am* tired,’ observed Charley, sinking into a chair, and simultaneously taking a great stretch and a great yawn.

‘Let someone else go with Flo to Scobble’s, Charley,’ suggested Mr. Curteis.

‘No, father, I’ll take her. She is scared, and she will feel safe with me. Don’t you

think you had better go to mother, and find out what she has been saying to Flo?’

‘Perhaps it would be as well,’ replied his father.

But when Charley was gone to see about Flo’s horse, Mr. Curteis again took up the ‘Field,’ and remained by his own fire reading it.

CHAPTER VII.

CHANCE threw in Charley's way, as he passed to the stables, Catherine, the ladies' maid. He sent her at once to assist Florelle, and further entrusted her with the commission of conveying what had happened to Mrs. Cassilys, out of Miss Cassilys's hearing, as soon as possible.

In consequence, before long, an interruption, whilst she was dressing, a brief colloquy in whispers, and some effective gesticulation on the part of the French servant, put Mrs. Cassilys in possession of the truth.

‘Is that Catherine?’ asked Marcella, whose back was turned towards them. ‘I wish you would go to my room, Catherine, and get me a morning dress.’

‘It is quite impossible to go to Mademoi-

selle's room, Madame,' explained Catherine ;
'but I will come back presently.' Then she left.

How should Mrs. Cassilys tell Marcella ?

She asked, 'Have you any idea who that was in your room last night, dear ?'

'None. I scarcely saw him. Who was it ?'

'Mr. Rintearn.'

Marcella tossed her head with a movement of disgust. 'In a lady's bedroom !'

'I would not, though, say anything against him now, dear,' observed Mrs. Cassilys significantly.

'Why, mamma ?' She caught in the mirror she had just approached a reflection of her mother's face, and turning exclaimed, 'Mamma ! what is the matter ?'

'Mr. Rintearn has destroyed himself.'

'Mamma ! you don't say so.'

Marcella laid down the brush she held in her hand, stood half a minute silent and still, and then sank into the chair by the side of the

toilet table, taking up her handkerchief, and passing it two or three times across her lips. Then she said,

‘Oh, but this is very, very shocking. He always was so violent in everything. When did this happen?’

‘Why, last night in your room.’

‘In my room. After I came to you?’

‘No,’ rejoined Mrs. Cassilys slowly, and as if surprised not to be more easily understood. ‘He was dead when you saw him. He had gone up to your room whilst we were all in the drawing-room, and shot himself on your bed with the little French pistol you gave Charley.’

‘Oh, this is horrible,’ moaned Marcella, covering her pale face. ‘Please don’t tell me any more. Shocking, shocking!’ She continued, her speech broken by spells of silence, ‘Poor Lady Julia, her only son!—How Mr. Keppel will feel it, too!—I wish aunty had not asked me here.—I always knew Mr. Rintearn would do something frightful.—How thankful I am I

did not see him.—People will speak very ill of me.—I do fear I have been too hard, but what can a girl say to a man she sees it would be foolish to marry, who will give her no peace? —I *must* have a black dress.—I always had a presentiment he would do me some great harm, and now he has put a shadow upon all my life.—Dead! And I might have saved him! All over; out of reach!—Why did aunty bring us together?—Oh, mamma, I feel so faint.'

She did not, however, faint, for Mrs. Cassilys came promptly to her assistance.

Breakfast was late. At the hour when it was usually ready, Laurier, entering the dining-room, found the servants engaged only in the preliminaries of preparations. He went to the window, and, pushing aside the blind, opened it, and stepped out on the terrace. A keen October morning, moist but bright, with a pale watery sunshine, formed a refreshing change from the close melancholy of the house. A

heavy dew lay on the grass, and beaded with pearls the autumn spiders' webs. In the low morning lights the withering leafage presented a brightness of pale tones peculiar to the hour, and a sharp scent of fading foliage pervaded the air. Laurier strolled round to the front door, and then, sensible of relief from the short minutes in the clear atmosphere, entered, and taking a hat proceeded, without regarding whither he went, to take a saunter in the park.

Selecting one of the less frequented roads, he walked pretty briskly some three quarters of a mile. Then the tall figure of a girl in black, whom he recognised at a glance, passing slowly, in the same direction as himself, along the path before him caused him to halt.

It was Marcella come to face in the open air what she could not face in the gloom, to face alone what she could not otherwise nerve herself to face at all. Her head was bent forward, one hand hung behind her, almost as if held there to invite him to follow and help

her. The other, to judge from the position of her elbow, was pressed to her lips. She walked exceedingly slowly.

‘Poor girl,’ thought Laurier.

But he was the last man to intrude himself on her trouble. He let her gain some twenty yards, and then stepping on the grass followed her with inaudible tread till a fork in the path enabled him to take a road different from hers.

She walked on without changing her pose or pace. The narrower way he had chosen ran, he found, parallel with hers, a little above it, screened from it by an irregular growth of shrubs and trees. He had soon overtaken and passed her, and, availing himself of a convenient opportunity, stood aside to gain a closer view of her as she approached.

The broad brim of her hat hid her face, but he saw that she held her handkerchief in the hand that pressed her lips. It was probable she was weeping.

She proceeded a little farther, and then

with a sigh loud enough to reach him came to a stop, joining her hands and stretching them down before her. A seat was near, and, stepping to it, she dropped into one corner as if weary. At times she was restless, supporting her head now on one hand, now on the other, moving on her seat, and leaning now in this way, now in that ; at other times she would be motionless, her fingers knitted in her lap, her eyes fixed on her feet.

Then she rose, looked right and left, and turned back. When she had gone a little past the spot where he first saw her she turned again.

Ignorant that the seat and the spot where she turned marked parts of the unfrequented road, beyond which it was visible from the house, Laurier began to form the opinion she expected someone.

Presently came sounds of an approaching horse. Marcella started, and caught nervously at her shawl. Another minute during which

she stood watching, and the horse came in sight. It was Charley returning from Scobble's.

‘Marcella!’ he exclaimed, sharply reining up, and jumping from his horse to her side.

He laid his hand in a familiar way across her shoulders. ‘Poor Marcella!’ he said tenderly.

Marcella lifted her face, terribly white in its marble grief, and Charley bent and kissed several times the pallid lips she offered him.

‘Don’t cry, Marcella,’ he said.

‘No, Charley, I won’t cry. I have not been crying.’

Charley took his horse’s bridle on his arm, and they walked away together, she leaning on his arm. Marcella was speaking again,

‘I can face it, Charley, and I shall face it well, you shall see; and ——’

Then they were too far off for Laurier to hear any words, and soon had passed out of sight.

Laurier folded his arms. 'Of course,' he thought, but it was evident the thought cost him pain, 'and what could be more natural or more to be desired, except that they are first cousins. Bah! I am attempting special pleading with myself. I cannot with justice say I wish I had seen it before. I have seen it twenty times, if I had chosen to understand.'

'Mr. Laurier's compliments, ma'am, and, if you could see him, he would like to say good-bye to you and Miss Cassilys before he leaves.'

Marcella and her mother were upstairs in Florelle's little sitting-room. Marcella, weary of mind with the labour of considering how it became her, under her difficult circumstances, to behave, and prostrated past everything except waiting for fresh strength, sat in an arm-chair by the hearth taciturn and languid. Already she had been made to feel a difference of position. Some of the guests

in the house, it was true, had been markedly kind and considerate, but others, which largely increased her distress, had shunned her in a manner not to be misunderstood. Mrs. Cassilys sat on the sofa opposite her. She had just come from a free grumble with Mr. Curteis concerning the annoying nature of the whole affair, in which, to judge from the way they spoke, a hearer might have supposed them the two persons of all chiefly aggrieved. She was now sitting silent, leaving her daughter to herself, as the kindest thing that could be done.

She took the card from the servant. 'I suppose everyone is leaving,' she said.

'Yes, ma'am.'

'Will you see Mr. Laurier, Marcella?'

'If you like,' replied the girl indifferently.

Mrs. Cassilys bade the servant bring Mr. Laurier up.

'I think Mr. Laurier might have asked to see me before this,' remarked Marcella when

they were again alone. 'It is an occasion when, if his regard for me is worth anything, he should have shown it me. But this is a mere courtesy, probably to indicate his sense of the loss of caste I have undergone.'

Mrs. Cassilys made a little grimace.

'Marcella,' she said, 'your pride will be your ruin. Can't you remember that this man is very really in love with you, and has on him all the shyness of love? You have misjudged him in taking for a slight his not directly coming to see you. If you are going to persevere in that kind of thing, you will lose him.'

'I daresay I shall—scarcely out of my heart though.' She spoke pensively, more as to herself than to her mother.

'Very pretty, Marcella, but uncommonly like some of poor Mr. Rintearn's speeches.'

'Mamma!' expostulated Marcella.

'I beg your pardon, my dear; but listen, here comes Mr. Laurier.'

‘The man I love,’ thought Marcella ; ‘ now what help will he bring me ? ’

Laurier entered. He was mentally assuring himself he was doing a foolish thing. When they had shaken hands, and some formal thanks for his courtesy in coming to bid them farewell, and some commonplace inquiries had been exchanged, Mrs. Cassilys excused herself, and, wishing Laurier a pleasant journey to town, where, she added, she hoped they might meet again, left the room.

He closed the door behind her, and remained standing as if immediately about to make his adieu to Marcella.

‘ Will you not sit down ? ’ she suggested.

He took the seat on the sofa Mrs. Cassilys had left, and began to speak rapidly of his return to work, the things he intended to do, and similar subjects. Marcella, directly opposite, sat still, frequently lifting her eyes to his face, with some look of surprise at the topics of which he preferred to speak.

When he paused she leaned back in the corner of her chair, and, shading her face with a Japanese fire-screen taken from the chimney-piece, asked hesitatingly,

‘Mr. Laurier—is that—all—you have to say to me—on a morning—so difficult for me as this is?’

He averted his eyes from hers.

‘I want, please, to know what you think,’ she asked more firmly. ‘Do you blame me—much?’

‘Indeed, Miss Cassilys, I have no claim to judge your conduct.’ He spoke coldly.

Her eyes dropped, and she heaved a long sigh.

‘I see,’ she said, toying with the fire-screen, ‘my position, in your judgment, is a good deal changed. Well—you are mistaken. I have thought of it well, and I *know* I am not changed.’

He looked at her at last. It was a look not unkind, but hard and searching.

‘Nor is my opinion of you changed, Miss Cassilys,’ he said slowly, and with evident difficulty ; ‘my regard for your character is not of the kind that alters in a night.’

‘Then tell me what you think, how far you blame me ?’

‘I blame no one.’

‘That means—if any one else had said it, I should have said—nothing. As you have said it, I will try to think what it means.’

He rose and stood with his back to the fire. Her last speech demanded an answer more cogently than any request could, and he, after a little silence, replied,

‘I think, you know, that it was very natural Mr. Rintearn should have formed a great regard for you—and equally natural you should not have been able to reciprocate it—and, with his temperament, I fear the rest was inevitable.’

He spoke with an extraordinary calmness and composure.

‘Then at least *you* do not blame me.’

‘Not at all.’

‘I am glad, very glad. I would rather have been thought guilty by all the rest and guiltless by you, than guilty by you and guiltless by all the rest.’

‘Your opinion of my judgment is very flattering, Miss Cassilys,’ he answered with a smile; ‘and now——’ He paused. ‘By the way—that is well thought of—there must be a coroner’s inquest, you know, and you will be examined, possibly, very closely.’

He proceeded to give her some hints of what would take place, putting before her the sort of questions that would be asked her, and showing her the kind of answers she should confine herself to giving in reply. And he pointed out that a circumstantial account of what occurred in the turret at the ruins would more than suffice to satisfy a coroner’s jury of Rintearn’s insanity, without a further introduction into the evidence of other circumstances,

that might be better passed over for his sake and for her own.

She listened with patience, and at the end said simply, 'Thanks.' Then she asked quickly, 'Was Mr. Rintearn mad?'

Laurier shrugged his shoulders. 'It is the fashion to say so,' he said, 'but—really—I suspect no more than any other man who does foolish things.'

'That is what I think.'—A little pause.—'I fear, Mr. Laurier, people will say very hard things of me. That is a painful thing for a woman.'

'Those who hear of it will, some of them, say strange things,' he answered, 'and afterwards treat you—as it is their interest to treat you—that is, much as before, Miss Cassilys.'

He looked down at her bent head, with its fine hair daintily parted. There was much more he would fain have said, for he could see the woman's heart was heavy. But all that was another man's right, and he was not going

to trespass on it. Then he moved from the fire, and said he must bid her good-bye.

She rose and lay her hand in the hand he offered, looking some sorrow into his eyes.

‘I am very sorry for your trouble, Miss Cassilys,’ he said, speaking slowly and clearly, ‘but, at least, it has not been deserved; and I believe your own way of thinking and looking at life will enable you to master it, very possibly to bring good out of it. Anyhow, I am sure yours is not the character to be disheartened to find that the world is what it is. And then before I go—I think you know that you have taught me something—may I say for it—thanks—and, that men cannot always help it—and, that I beg your pardon? Good-bye, Miss Cassilys.’

He turned from her quickly, as her hand fell from his, and without looking round walked to the door.

‘Good-bye,’ said Marcella, in an undertone, as her eyes followed him going.

The door opened and closed. He was gone.

Marcella returned to her seat.

Of course he meant he had not been able to help liking her very much, and believed she would be offended at it. What should have made him think that?

She tried to understand, but her thought would not work. Everything got unintelligibly muddled with everything else. The only fact clear was a great disappointment. She gave up the endeavour to think, till her nerves had had time to recover their senses, and leaned back in the soft, luxurious chair, motionless, purposeless, thinking of nothing.

Her mother returned.

‘Mr. Laurier is gone,’ observed Marcella, without looking up.

‘So I see.’

Mrs. Cassilys took a paper-knife from the table and commenced cutting a magazine she

had on her lap. After a time Marcella spoke again,

‘He has got it into his head that I don’t care for him.’

‘Naturally, seeing nothing has ever been said or done to make him think otherwise.’

‘I don’t see that, mamma. Dear me, I had no idea how I had come to look forward to seeing him day by day. I shall miss him very much.’

‘Of course, dear, you took very good care that he should not suppose you were going to miss him at all, nor suspect that you cared a straw whether you ever saw him again or not.’

‘I am not going to tell a man I love him before he has unequivocally told me he loves me, nor to show it him either,’ replied the girl proudly.

‘No, poor man, I don’t suppose he got much encouragement.’

It seemed to Marcella he had had quite as much as any man has any right to receive.

After a time Tommy, having been a dozen times forbidden to do so, managed to escape from the nursery and to steal to his aunt and cousin.

‘Auntie Eleanor,’ began the child, ‘if you please I want to come to you, though I mustn’t. In the nursery I must not play nor anything, and it is quite dark with all the blinds down. And I’m not to go out, and I must not laugh, and I don’t know what to do. May I stay with you?’

‘What nonsense this is,’ said Marcella, ‘to punish the child. Come here, Tommy, and I will tell you a tale.’

Presently Mrs. Cassilys left the room for a few minutes. Tommy promptly interrupted Marcella’s tale.

‘I want to tell you something, cousin Marcella.’

‘What is that?’

‘Do you know—Mr. Rintearn is dead.’

‘I know, Tommy. It is very dreadful. We must not talk about it.’

‘No. I know—but—you won’t tell, will you—if I tell you something?’

‘I won’t tell.’

‘I’m *glad*,’ said Tommy in an emphatic whisper.

‘Hush, Tommy! That is very naughty. You must not say that.’

‘Yes, I know it is naughty,’ replied Tommy aloud. ‘But I know he wanted to marry you, and now he can’t. And I’m glad.’

CHAPTER VIII.

THE task of telling Lady Julia Keppel undertook.

He had started early, Charley driving him down to catch the first train, before it was light. As they parted at the station Keppel said,

‘Be sure Miss Cassilys knows everything before we arrive, and tell her, in case Lady Julia asks to see her, she *must* decline to be seen. That,’ he looked at Charley significantly, ‘is as much for her own sake as for Lady Julia’s.’

Before the end of his railway journey was reached day had dawned. He took a horse and rode to Sritten Court.

A thin mist hung among the trees of the park, and a quiet, stilly look of unchangeable-

ness rested on the whole scene. Nature has no sympathies with man.

An old man came hobbling from the lodge to open the gate.

‘Ei, lor, sir, Mr. Keppel, be it you?’ he said. ‘Well now, you be early this morning. Her ladyship was speaking of you, sir, to me——’

Throwing the man sixpence, Keppel pushed his horse through as soon as there was room to pass between the gate and the post, and pressed on.

‘Well, there now,’ said the old man, ‘I never saw Mr. Keppel in a hurry afore.’

Keppel pushed on at a sharp trot along the well-known road, between the iron railings, past the familiar clumps of trees and views of meadow and lawn, with peeps of Sritten Court appearing and disappearing with the turns of the road.

‘Poor Jack’s inheritance,’ he thought. ‘Poor Jack!’

At the door he asked, 'Is Lady Julia down yet?'

'At breakfast, sir.'

Keppel walked past the footman and went to the breakfast-room. Lady Julia was breakfasting alone at the end of the table, opening and reading her morning letters the while. As Keppel entered she looked up, and said, 'Eh, Mr. Keppel! Good-morning, Hunt.'

He came down the room, and, pushing a chair up to the corner of the table near her, as she sat down again (for she had risen to shake hands), said,

'I am come with the very worst of news.'

The imperious old woman eyed him unflinchingly. 'Yes,' she said; 'what?'

'Jack has shot himself.'

He said it quickly, just above a whisper, but firmly.

Lady Julia leaned forward, and her head sank on her breast. Very soon she looked up and said,

‘That is all, then.’

She meant father, mother, daughter, husband, son.

Then she asked, ‘When was this, and where?’

‘Last night at Wyvenhome. He shot himself in Miss Cassilys’s bedroom. She had refused him——’

‘I know. The young woman did her duty,’ interrupted Lady Julia. ‘Go on.’

‘I had no idea you knew of this,’ continued Keppel with surprise. ‘After that, as indeed before—for I always thought she would refuse him—I urged him to return to you. When he left Wyvenhome I hoped he had done so. But it appears he secretly returned to the house, and when Miss Cassilys went to her room in the evening she found him there, dead.’

Lady Julia drew her lips tightly together, and sat with her eyes set in a steady, level gaze straight before her. Then she said,

‘I must see my boy, Hunt.’

‘Take my serious advice—don’t. It will do him no good, poor fellow; and you will only be dreadfully distressed.’

‘I must see him, Hunt.’

‘Lady Julia, be advised, don’t attempt this.’

But all dissuasion was vain. ‘Like mother, like son, no persuading them; no wonder they could not agree,’ thought Keppel. The carriage was ordered, and Lady Julia went to dress. In the interim Keppel breakfasted.

In the train (scarcely a word had been so far exchanged) Lady Julia said suddenly,

‘John did come to me yesterday. He came about five in the afternoon.’

‘Indeed! You saw him then?’

‘No; I refused to see him. I had bidden him return to me in three days or not at all, and he had disobeyed me.’

Keppel bit the inside of his lip.

At Wyvenhome Lady Julia requested she might see no one but her son. Her wish was made known, and on her arrival the house

might have been taken for one deserted. At the last moment Keppel again essayed dissuasion, but Lady Julia was obdurate. Commandingly she set aside all he urged; and, even declining his offer to accompany her into the library, where the body lay, entered alone—erect, austere, imperious, as ever.

Keppel, she had requested it, waited without.

It was long before she returned, between three quarters of an hour and an hour. Then the door opened very softly and she stole out.

A broken old woman, with palsied limbs, with hanging head, with tremulous, drooping lips.

Keppel regarded her with alarm.

‘Hunt,’ she stammered, with difficulty, ‘I must do justice—the only atonement I can—make. What I can—for this girl—I shall make — this only atonement — in my power.’

She thrust her trembling arm within his, and leaned, quivering, against him.

‘Has she lost her senses, poor woman?’ wondered Keppel.

Not lost, poor woman, but found them; only, as some unhappy people are doomed to discover everything, too late. In that terrible gloom, with her dead son, at last had broken upon her the truth of her way, and his, with a crushed repentance that was fain to do what it could in the way of tardy amends.

‘Let us go on,’ she said, wearily; ‘I must see Miss Cassilys. Let us go into some room, and then send for her.’

They went into the dining-room and a message was sent to Marcella, Keppel congratulating himself on his precautionary warning to Charley. In a few minutes the servant returned. ‘Miss Cassilys’s compliments, and she is in the little drawing-room at Lady Julia Rintearn’s service.’

Lady Julia rose. ‘Show me the way,’ she said to the servant, with a little of her old

authority. Then, turning to Keppel, ‘Wait for me here till I return.’

As if fatigued, she followed the servant out of the room.

Marcella stood by the fire in the little drawing-room. She had on a black silk, one of her own obtained at last. Only a sense of the consideration a terrible grief should find had occasioned her consent to see Lady Julia, and the hardened lines of her handsome face and its chill pallor showed her mind presaged an ordeal.

The door opened, and Lady Julia entered slowly. Marcella advanced to meet her. They met in the middle of the room, tall women of about the same height, face to face.

But in an instant Marcella had sunk her eyes before the sight of a face of agony, whose terribleness made her heart sicken, and changed her colour to ashes.

So they stood more than a minute, the girl’s motionless form undulated in one of those

postures of grace that made a part of her nature, the fingers of her right hand nervously clenched at her side, her white neck guiltily bent, and her colourless face turned to the ground at the left of her feet.

Then Lady Julia said, ‘Miss Cassilys, look at me.’

Slowly Marcella lifted and turned her face. Her hands, joining each other, hung before her with fingers interlaced; and with her head inclined the least trifle forwards, she faced as she could the old noblewoman’s terrible gaze of scrutiny and woe.

To satisfy her ladyship took long. At last she said, ‘Sit down, Miss Cassilys.’

Marcella complied with thankfulness. Lady Julia seated herself at her side.

‘How old are you, my lass?’ she asked in a tone as far as could be from that Marcella had anticipated.

‘Twenty-two, Lady Julia; nearly twenty-three.’

‘Yes, yes, yes, yes,’ muttered the old woman; ‘I had something to say to you.’

A long silence. Then Lady Julia, again,
‘I must—must—hm.’

‘What is it you wish to say to me?’ asked the girl in her gentlest way, ‘something you wish me to tell you, or would like me to do?’

‘No, no, no.’

Another silence.

‘I wish you to know,’ recommenced Lady Julia, ‘one must do what one can. Why did you refuse to marry my son?’

‘He was too far above me in rank and wealth for us to have married wisely; and I knew his friends disliked the idea of it, and, I thought, justly, for many reasons.’

‘Did you ever tell him that?’

‘I did, Lady Julia, and very many times.’

‘Yes. I know you did. It was not you—I have something to say to you. All I can do now is to say it. I shall manage it presently, my dear.’ Then suddenly she took Marcella’s

wrist, and catching her breath between her words, said, 'It was I—killed him. I loved him dearly, and I wanted him to see it, don't you understand? And I could not bear his having any way but mine. I—I'—the poor miserable woman was literally shaking Marcella in her grasp—'I—he came to me, to Sritten Court, yesterday, and I would not see him. I had told him not to speak again to you, and I had bidden him to come back to me within three days, and he disobeyed me—and I refused to see him, and ordered him to leave the house.—Wait: I will tell you the rest presently.' After a long pause she spoke again, 'I sent him a message by the servant,—since he had preferred you—you must not be angry with a miserable old woman. I have my punishment—since he preferred you to me, to go back to you. And so—you know—he went back. But I had made him desperate. And you—my poor child—don't blame yourself—take your young life—he loved you well ——'

She relinquished Marcella's wrist, and leaning forward at last began to sob.

It is pitiful to see the young weep, but the tears of age are terrible.

Marcella rose, and stood looking down, wondering what a stranger should do in the presence of grief so dread. Then, bending to Lady Julia's ear, she said gently, 'I am going away for a little while to see that no one comes in here, and will return presently.'

She locked the folding doors between the two drawing-rooms, and then almost noiselessly glided from the room by the other entrance.

When she returned it was with some refreshments, which she brought in her own hands. After a time a gentle persuasion induced Lady Julia to partake of them, the girl either waiting upon her or respectfully sitting silent and apart. Now and then Lady Julia's eyes stole a long glance at the still form and pensive face by the hearth, but nothing was said.

At last Lady Julia rose. Marcella came to her.

‘Before you go, Lady Julia,’ she said, bending, ‘I wish to express my endless thanks for your great consideration for me.’

Lady Julia took her hand, and drew her to her as if meaning to say something more. But words for it, whatever it was, failed her, and she only said,

‘Give me your arm to the carriage, Miss Cassilys.’

At the carriage door she asked, ‘Could you come with me to the station, and then Mr. Keppel could stay here?’

In a few minutes Marcella rejoined her dressed for the drive.

Arrived at the station, she persuaded Lady Julia to remain in the carriage till the train came in. She herself alighted and made arrangements, insisting with the guard on an empty compartment, when the train arrived, and conducting Lady Julia to it. Then, the

old lady's knees carefully wrapped in her rug, and a final offer to accompany her further, should she wish it, refused, Marcella bade her farewell, and having closed the carriage door, dropped her a curtsy as the train rolled off.

Lady Julia leaned back in the corner of the compartment. 'Would,' she murmured, 'that I could change lots with Mrs. Cassilys.'

Marcella came back to Wyvenhome—crying as if her heart would burst.

When evening fell the party was reduced to the small circle of the family alone. Even Keppel was gone, to town, to arrange matters of business.

In the little drawing-room, before dinner, Mrs. Curteis found opportunity for a short talk with Marcella, seated with a book open but unread in her lap, and with her eyes still disfigured by their storms of tears.

'This is a bad business for you, Marcella,'

she said, proceeding to warm her hands at the fire.

‘A sad one. But it is for poor Lady Julia I grieve. I have been only unlucky.’

‘A bit guilty, Marcella.’

‘No, aunty,’ replied the girl with aplomb, ‘I have nothing with which to reproach myself. I almost wish I had. It would lighten this poor Lady Julia’s agony.’

‘H’m—Well. It will make a great difference in your life, Marcella.’

‘No, none.’

‘Ah, don’t deceive yourself with that thought, niece. You’ll have to descend after this. You’ll soon find it out. You are a marked woman, you know; and a woman marked is a woman branded. The rest who are not marked make her know it too. You are not one of us, you know, now. You have lost caste. Yesterday you might have made a grand match. I don’t say you wished it. To-day you could not if you wished it. You will find the

men shy of your charms after this, Marcella, and not the men alone, other people too. You belong, you see, to the class of women who have occasioned suicides. It is very hard on you, of course, but it is so. Dear me! What a blow this would have been to your poor father.'

Marcella bent her head over the book in her lap. 'I don't think so,' she said pensively.

'Ah, you don't see things in their real light. Has your mother said anything about it?'

'Hardly anything.'

'Ah. Your uncle?'

'Nothing.'

'And Mr. Keppel, you have spoken to him—nothing?'

'I know what you wish to insinuate, aunty,' said Marcella, looking up at her and speaking firmly, 'and I entirely refuse to admit it. My own temperament is not changed, and my mind is not changed, and this insinuation that I am changed is simply unjust.'

'My dear niece, your circumstances are

changed. The world knows nothing about temperaments, and cares nothing about thoughts. It judges of facts. There is a fact in your life to-day that was not there twenty-four hours ago—you are right, and very clever to affect to disregard it, because you cannot alter it; but still it is there, and that fact is—that you, with your coqueties, have been the cause of a man's shooting himself.'

So triumphant was Mrs. Curteis's tone, that 'One might really imagine you were glad of it,' flashed across Marcella's brain. But she thrust the thought aside with a sharp self-reproof for the presence of so mean a suspicion. From the self-defence she might easily have set up, after what Lady Julia had said, she refrained. It would have been to abuse the consideration shown her. But in the view of speeches such as her aunt's, the things Laurier had spoken in the morning, judged at the time so cold and few, began to take the appearance of words just and helpful and kind. Their

quiet, dispassionate nature, felt then to diminish their value, turned now to enhance it.

Unaccustomed thoughts accompanied Marcella to her pillow that night, thoughts of gathering heavy clouds, fears for the future that refused to be dispelled.

CHAPTER IX.

LONDON received Laurier once more. It is never with indifference that the inhabitant of a great city returns into its life, and Laurier felt an impression of relief as the hansom, rumbling out from under the grim pile of King's Cross, brought before his eyes the not comely but familiar view of the Pentonville Road, and the low-lying station of the Metropolitan Railway.

He had got back to town, and what he had left behind him, somehow assumed an air of unreality.

And when he found himself again in his quiet chambers in the Inner Temple, the cab dismissed, the luggage deposited in the little lobby, the journey home, a thing of the past, with all the rest, it became difficult to accept

the history of the last three weeks for true.

Yet, as he sat in the window-seat, and looked out on King's Bench Walk, at the mellowed red-brick buildings, the hall and library, and the rough pebble pavement, and the sycamore trees on which remained so many fewer leaves than on the trees at Wyvenhome, it was not without a feeling of regret that he thought with himself,

‘ And so here am I once more, to commence the old routine. My holiday is ended, and all that down there is ended, and this foolishness about Miss Cassilys too. A sort of waking dream.’ He rose and began to unpack.

The room, it was his sitting-room, was a small one, on the second floor, in King's Bench Walk, on which its two narrow front windows looked out. A little window-seat was fitted in each. A round table occupied the middle of the chamber, and a smaller round table with a little sofa and some chairs made up the simple

furniture, of no particular kind, of a room plainly papered and carpeted. In the recesses on both sides of the fireplace stood bookshelves filled to overflowing with literature of a very miscellaneous description. A few prints, of no value, but chosen with taste, hung upon the walls. On the mantel-piece was a clock, and a pair of bronze candlesticks representing Nubians, and above, some riding-whips and foils.

The room was entered from a lobby, from which another door opened on the staircase. This lobby was panelled and painted grey. It had queer, low seats all round, with lids that opened like lockers. Into the same lobby opened the bedroom, and a third chamber set apart for business, a more formal one, boasting many chairs, a big bookshelf partly empty, partly occupied by works exclusively legal, and a large table covered with leather, on which stood a reading lamp and a writing desk. In one corner of this room a window,

Cassilys, as she left the room, thankful to be able to dismiss the whole affair from her thought, ‘but what confidence the child has!’

Soon Florelle, secretly on the watch for Mrs. Cassilys’s departure, interrupted a solitude her cousin could have wished longer.

‘Was I right, Marcella?’ she asked with curiosity.

‘You were.’

‘Isn’t it horrid?’

‘I can’t say I enjoyed it.’

‘And whom have you orders to marry; Mr. Rintearn?’

‘No.’

‘Ah, then it is F. D. G. K. K. Hammerbratsch. He has the most money, and so the burthen of the song is, “Keep your heart whole for F. D. G. K. K. H.”’ She had seated herself at her ease in an immense arm-chair, and as she spoke designed in the air, with a flourish of her hand, the letters she named.

‘You are again wrong.’

‘Oh, Marcella! It’s not Charley, is it?’ exclaimed Florelle, jumping from her seat with pleasure, and running across to where her cousin sat, where she knelt on the floor and looked up into her face, saying, ‘And we shall be sisters. I have so often thought of that.’

‘No,’ a little coldly.

‘Somebody else! Aunty has found a new “big fish,” to quote papa. Or is it something about Mr. Laurier?’

‘Why should it be anything about Mr. Laurier?’

‘Because you are the only girl he cares to speak to.’

‘I have not noticed it.’

‘Then other people have,’ remarked Florelle, with a little important nod of her pretty head. ‘Marcella, you are nasty,’ she went on as she rose from her knees, ‘you might as well tell about whom it is.’

‘It is not about any one except myself.’

For, it was not to be concealed from himself, he had need of distractions.

He had expected to be summoned to attend the inquest on Rintearn, but there was more than an ample abundance of evidence without his, and a desire to conduct the affair as quietly as was possible, and he was not sent for.

It was a disappointment, for of course *she* must have been there.

So quietly, dully, glided away the rest of October. The days grew shorter, and shorter, and the weather more bleak. The last leaves were long since down and swept away from the walk, and the wind soughed wearily about the courts of the Temple. Men came back to town in numbers. Some avowed Guy Laurier somewhat changed, and others reported to him that they had said it, but none seemed to know how or why. As days pass fewer men come to see him and he begins to leave off calling on them ; at least he discovers he lives more alone, and aloof from the rest of them than formerly.

But when the day is done, his little room is pleasant and snug, with the old curtains drawn, and the fire blazing in the grate, and he would as lief be alone as not, with a book and a good cigar, bending his mind to his study, and keeping some thoughts as far from himself as he can.

And now the sittings have recommenced, and harder work, heavy work, very heavy work, that leaves few hours or even minutes to spare. That is partially due to Keppel, who, without a hint of solicitation, has exerted his effective influence here and there to push and pull Laurier forwards. He has three times the business he had, and a growing success and repute proportionate with it.

So the studies have been thrust aside, and the evenings, often till late at night, are devoted to getting up work for the morrow. The health and strength recruited in the summer are taxed, taxed to their very end, for the man is throwing himself with more than all his mind and

strength into great fatigues, thankful and wishful to have neither spare hours nor energies.

For he has a great battle to fight with himself.

And as he knocks off, with a sort of impatience, the ash from the end of a cigar, against the old-fashioned grate, or folds up a brief and tosses it down, or jerks a book back into its place on the shelf, or stands unoccupied for an instant to look down through the long telescope of dingy walls to his narrow glimpse of the cold Thames, he says to himself, 'Who could have thought it? Who *could* have thought it?'

For him, too, like all the rest, the 'Eternal Feminine' has become a fact, and his rest is gone from him.

At Wyvenhome the inquest went off very quietly. Partly owing to Keppel's intervention, and partly out of a feeling of respect, Lady Julia was questioned only in the briefest and

most formal way. Marcella was necessarily one of the principal witnesses, and was subjected to a very sharp examination. The manifest veracity of her unaffected replies gave her at once the confidence of the court; but, for all that, the affair assumed for her an aspect excessively distressing. As step by step was detailed the story of how she had refused Rintearn, it was plain that the feelings of both jury and spectators were becoming strongly prejudiced against her, and this to so great a degree that her conduct was publicly censured by the coroner as heartless and vindictive in the most unqualified sense.

She bore the brow-beating well, looking him in the face whilst he spoke, with features empty alike of reproach or dismay, telling herself in her thoughts, that the great, bare room of the country inn, with its hideous walls, and more hideous varnished pictures of celebrated jockeys on celebrated racers, the stale smell, and the straining crowd of clowns was a part of

the price of life, which, the thing being worth the price, it became a woman of spirit to pay without complaint.

Once only she remonstrated in the words, 'I regret that my conduct appears to you to have been so largely reprehensible, but I can only tell you the truth.'

It was easy enough, if she chose, to make her case stand in another light; but a dead man's defencelessness and a broken-hearted woman's feelings were to be considered, and Marcella Cassilys's nature preferred to spare them rather than itself.

Then for half an hour they laboured to make her say she believed Rintearn insane, putting the question direct in every conceivable form, trying to get her to admit things that implied it, descending to the expedient of tripping her in her speech with quibbles, but all without success. Her replies were always in substance the same,

'Mr. Rintearn was naturally inflexible, a

man who could not brook failure. He sometimes appeared to her to have a natural propensity to be violent, but that propensity he almost always had under control.'

Even when the coroner suggested, 'Would it not much mitigate your own grounds for self-reproach, Miss Cassilys, to think this unfortunate gentleman was not master of his actions?' she only replied, 'Whether he was master of his actions or not I am unable to say; I suspect he was so throughout.'

'It would be less painful for you to think otherwise.'

'In the end it will be least painful for me to face the truth,' replied Marcella characteristically.

In effect her evidence narrowly failed of procuring a verdict of *felo-de-se*. Ultimately, however, the jury at the end of an hour and a half brought it in temporary insanity. To what extent that was due to Rintearn's own name

and Mr. Curteis's influence might be painful for the lover of justice and truth to inquire.

Then the whole affair was hushed up as quickly and entirely as was feasible.

Keppel accompanied Lady Julia back to Sritten Court.

‘That girl Miss Cassilys has behaved well,’ he said as they drove away, ‘she could, if she had chosen to exculpate herself, have said with truth some things you and I should have been sorry to hear, and poor Jack would not have liked to have publicly made known. He behaved uncommonly badly to her, and she has behaved uncommonly generously to his memory.’

In Mr. Curteis's carriage with her mother Marcella leaned back in her corner.

‘Now that dreadful business is finished at last,’ she observed, ‘and I am going to forget all about it, as fully and as fast as I can.’

‘My dear girl, how they have harried and slandered you!’

‘Don’t speak of it, mamma. It is finished, and it was, in reality, no fault of mine, and I am not going to think any more about it. Instead ; *when* are we going to leave Wyvenhome ? *Where* are we going ? And *what* shall we do when we get there ?’

They left in two days, and went to Torquay.

There Marcella was fated to find that her aunt’s words respecting her being a marked woman had more reason than was quite pleasant. Indisputably there were people who regarded her with shyness, and by no means people of the worse sort ; whilst, which was worse, some of the men, not of the best sort, dared with her a tone that implied they accepted her for a young lady with an adventure attached to her name. Nor was it once or twice that she overheard passers-by remark, ‘That is that Miss Cassilys, for whom Lord Langley’s nephew shot himself.’

However, as time went on she kept her word to herself, and effected a tolerably satis-

factory erasure from her memory of the shock of her unfortunate admirer's suicide. If the black spectre rose, and sometimes it would rise, immediate diversion, mostly of a quiet kind, put it to flight, until, after the manner of disregarded spectres, it ceased to importunate her with its appearance.

After that she had leisure of time, and of mind, to think.

She missed Laurier far less than she anticipated.

She loved him less, then? No, more.

In the sunrise of love, a woman of a refined nature foregoes with ease the presence of the man she loves, exactly as he is unquiet each instant he has to spend away from her side. This is why she, able to do without him, is always coquette with him, and he, unable to do without her, diffident, exacting, insatiable.

For these two creatures, woman and man, are not only moulded in differing forms, but

are unlike down to the very primary elements of their existence.

A man and a woman draw their breath in different ways.

She breathes almost exclusively by the heaving of her bosom, he by internal invisible organisations that leave his breast comparatively motionless.

The simple act of every breath may serve well for a symbol of their essentially differing natures. His being is something latent, for of force the nature is to be latent, and hers is something seen, for it is of the nature of the effect to be seen. Her ears fall in love with the word that stirs in his soul, his eyes with her soul come to light in her face. The spell of divinity that dwells in her is forfeited when she is rudely unveiled, that in him when he is reduced into dependence. And therefore the old order of things that he shall take and she be taken, that he shall pursue and she consent, that he shall protect her life, and she crown

his, is not of the institution of states, nor of the customs of societies, nor of the convenience of men, but of the essence of things, irremovable as gravitation.

And so she is furnished with every instinct of things that are pursued, and he with every instinct of the creatures that pursue, she with every grace and gift that can make her a guerdon of guerdons, creation's living, conscious flower whose soul is the breath of eternity, he with all determination and cunning to find, to take, to retain.

Wherefore she can wait, and he cannot.

Still it was a misjointed dualistic sort of life that Marcella at this time led, one that, when the mornings were mild, led her to sit on the pebbled beach, and number the beauty of fresh wavelets coming in, dubious of herself, whether still to wait and wait, or not to wait any more, a wishing and not wishing, a willingness to advance with a reluctance to move.

When at the end of each week Mrs. Cassilys said, 'The weather is so fine I think we might stay a week longer,' Marcella felt glad, and yet she counted the time long.

But beyond doubt *he* was happy and well, not in reality very far away, and possibly growing fonder of her, as she was of him, or so at least she loved to think, and as she had only to smile to bring him to her feet, woman that she was, she would rather for the present wait in her new happiness, and taste it to the full—like one who knew a spell, and forecasting its power of bliss, stood amused to put off from moment to moment to speak it.

How unlike it all was to anything experienced before ! How immensely thankful it made her that she had rejected those many other unreciprocated loves she had wisely put away from her.

One morning seated on the beach, lost in thought that prevented her hearing footsteps that approached, she was surprised by a

hand laid on her shoulder, and a voice that said,

‘ Marcella.’

It was Theo, dressed more showily than ever. She sat down by Marcella.

Mr. Stryne had been unwell, and was to spend the winter in Devonshire, and they had all come to Torquay.

‘ And how is your cousin Mr. Curteis ? ’ next asked Theo.

‘ Very well,’ replied Marcella, ‘ he is going to take to trade. Fancy Charley setting to work ! Is it not strange ? However, he has been seized with a sudden passion for making a fortune, and I suppose there is no other way. I fear only it will take him a long time.’

Theo had fallen silent. After a while she said,

‘ He is such a nice fellow. I hope he will succeed. When you write to him give him my kind regards, and tell him I think it so plucky of him, to go in for doing something. Will you ? ’

‘Certainly. And Prince Charming, has he appeared yet?’

‘Prince Uncharming has.’

‘Finally and fatally?’ It was asked with a little regret.

‘Oh no, it is not quite so bad as that.’

‘You are not engaged then yet, Theo?’

Theo made a pretence of having been too much interested in pushing a big pebble, with the point of her sunshade, to hear.

‘Who is it?’ asked Marcella.

‘Whom do you think? That Mr. Hammerbratsch. He has come into another fortune, and has twice as much as when he courted you; but that is not the worst of it. He has found out that the way to papa’s heart is down his throat, and that mamma likes to be thought fast, and in short he is rapidly becoming master of the situation.’

‘But not yet of Theo?’

‘No. Not yet. But it is perfectly awful to think what a fix I am in. I’ve been trying

‘This, “*Affinités secrètes.*” ’

She looked behind her to see if she could lean against the stone wall without soiling her dress, and assured she could, instead of returning to her seat remained, whilst he read, at Laurier’s side, leaning back in a position that permitted her to look, when she chose, in his face.

Laurier read exquisitely, both as respected his French pronunciation, and the feeling the words demanded. As he ceased, expressions of gratification of more sincerity than is on such occasions common rose from every one of the party.

Meanwhile he closed the book and gave it back to Miss Cassilys.

‘I don’t think I shall let you go with Mr. Curteis,’ she said, looking in his face as she slowly took back the volume; ‘couldn’t you be persuaded to stay and read to us?’

‘I will only suggest that Flo shall go to the library for Victor Hugo, in lieu of Théophile Gautier,’ said Mr. Curteis.

‘That is a censure on my taste, uncle,’ returned Marcella quickly. ‘I appeal against it. Mr. Rintearn, was not that a pretty poem?’

‘I can’t say I saw much in it, so far as I understood it at all,’ replied Rintearn.

Marcella wondered. Women with difficulty understand that some men in love have no tact.

She repeated her question to Laurier.

‘I am going to ask you, when you can spare the volume, to lend it to me. I should like to read the rest,’ he replied.

‘Take it now,’ she said, on the spot, giving him the book with a smile. ‘I hope you will like it. It is a favourite of mine.’

After all, there was no more reading. Perhaps a silent hint from Mrs. Cassilys to her brother-in-law occasioned that. Just as the men were going she said, ‘At least you must not leave us Mr. Rintearn,’ and Rintearn rapidly enough turned back, and remained.

‘To whom do you suppose?’

‘I don’t know. But, Theo, I suspect to a poor man.’

‘Hasn’t a halfpenny,’ replied Theo. ‘I am engaged to Charley Curteis.’

‘Theo!’

‘Yes. He is the dearest fellow in the whole world, as you always said. I’m awfully proud of his liking me. But’—a long pause—‘how on earth we are ever to get married I am sure I do not know; unless I run away with him.’

The long conversation that naturally ensued certainly seemed to point to no other conclusion.

For the next few weeks of Marcella’s stay at Torquay, Theo and Charley enjoyed, through her mediation, the pleasures of one of those correspondences which have from time immemorial lightened for lovers the days of inevitable waiting.

But at last the fine weather broke. Mrs.

Cassilys suggested return to town. Marcella said nothing. They remained at Torquay another week, during which the rain fell almost incessantly. Then they packed. They had a last dinner with the Strynes. Theo received her last note from Charley, and entrusted Marcella with her last reply. She came to the station to see them off, bidding Marcella farewell, with many kisses and a long sigh, for now the ever-increasing difficulty of staving off a *dénoûment* with Mr. Hammerbratsch was to be faced all alone, with no more assistance from Marcella's co-operation and encouraging exhortations.

In the evening, with a breast full of the sense of great changes, Marcella sat once more by the hearth of her library in town.

CHAPTER X.

A RUDE November evening, squally, and bleak with driven rain. A mess, Laurier and three cronies at dinner in the Inner Temple Hall. A genial light in the spacious room, giving the windows of coloured glass dead, meaningless, flat tints, making the sculptured masters and templars stand out in relief against the western wall, sparkling on the gold in the long rows of armorial bearings of treasurers ranging along the high wainscot, and bringing out in its best effect the great picture of Pegasus high above the benchers' table.

A bottle of wine had just been opened and the wonted courtesies exchanged among the men. As one put down his glass he asked, in

reference to the subject of the previous conversation,

‘And the end of this story?’

‘Well of course the woman was—a woman.’

Deceit and weak vileness of no common order stood implied, and the speaker’s utterance gave the word a value of corresponding worthlessness. The men laughed, and one of them, turning to Laurier, observed,

‘A new instance, Laurier, in support of your views respecting the sex.’

‘Laurier is not so keen on that theme as he used to be,’ observed the story-teller. ‘It is generally supposed he is coming round to more gallant views. Eh, Laurier?’

Laurier had not laughed. There had come into his mind—she who would come, though he kept her as far away as he could, a woman to believe whom capable of the grimaces, the lying, the dishonour of the creature of the story just narrated, was impossible: and his pulse, unbidden, had risen to hear vileness, by impli-

cation, attributed to her in all her truth and strength, and only for what she became so well—her womanhood.

He turned the speaker's question with a jest, and bore good-humouredly some sharp repartee, and then the subject of conversation changed.

When dinner was ended, declining an invitation to a friend's chambers, he went to his own, and in a musing mood sat down by the fire. The lamp was turned low, and its light added little to that given by the flames. He stretched out his hand to turn up the wick, and then, changing his mind, forbore to do so.

‘I cannot read to-night. It is useless to attempt it.’

He placed his elbow on the arm of the chair, and bending forward wearily, rested his forehead on his palm.

‘I make no progress; and I am knocking myself to pieces, throwing away all the strength I gathered.’

An oak cigar-case, with drawers, stood at his right. He opened it, and selecting a cigar, lit it, and, with his head rested on the chair-back, leaned back smoking.

‘Six, seven weeks, and I have not once permitted my thought to dwell on her.’

It was true, not once! He had found the colossal strength these seven weeks every time to crush down each memory as it rose.

‘And to-night I love the girl enough to have been at dinner within an ace of saying a foolish thing out of feeling for her. Yes, all that—and how much more?’

Yes, he had been very hard hit, very hard hit indeed.

‘I shall have to find a cure for this fever, somewhere.’

The evening letters were brought up. He turned up the lamp, and proceeded to examine them. Among them was a little note with a monogram ‘E.C.,’ directed in a lady’s hand. As he passed the letters through his hand he

stopped at this one, and hastily opened it on the spot.

‘Mrs. Cassilys requests the pleasure of Mr. Laurier’s company at dinner—*et cetera*.’ It was written, not an invitation card.

Without looking for the date of the dinner he drew some note-paper from a drawer, and, pushing his chair to the table, wrote, ‘Mr. Laurier regrets that a previous engagement prevents his accepting Mrs. Cassilys’s kind invitation.’ Then he sealed and directed his reply, and, without again looking at the note of invitation, threw it into the fire.

And Marcella had written it, because it was to go to him.

The small hours of the morning strike on the many clocks within hearing, and at the end of the table, leaning over the desk on which the shaded lamp pours down a flood of light, with great sheets of paper spread before him, Laurier is still at work.

But at last he has done. He goes to the

window and looks out at the night. A glimmer of lamps in the Temple, and, more indistinct, the sweep of the lights on the Embankment, amid torrents of rain.

He thinks, 'If I had accepted. One thing is I cannot now. It is fortunate I burnt that note, or——. I will *not* think of this.'

Mrs. Cassilys and her daughter were having afternoon tea in the library. Marcella, with her feet on a cushion, embedded in her favourite corner of the window-seat, reading a novel, her tea in the dainty Sèvres china placed on a little table at her side; Mrs. Cassilys doing nothing, nearer the fire, smiling from time to time to hear the music of the girl's merry laughter over the story-book.

A servant entered with the letters come by the afternoon post. Mrs. Cassilys turned them over, and selecting one brought it to her daughter.

‘Would you like to open this one, Marcella?’ she asked with a smile.

Marcella took the note. Her face wore a half-serious look. So this was his handwriting. She opened the envelope, and her eyes looked up to her mother with an expression of sharp disappointment.

‘Mr. Laurier cannot come, mamma.’

The note fell on the table. Mrs. Cassilys took it up and read it. Marcella had turned her head away, and was looking out upon the cold November sky. When her mother lay down the note, she took it up again, again read it, and again let it fall with the same gesture of disappointment.

‘Don’t be vexed, Marcella. We will ask him again. At any rate, after this he must call.’

‘Yes, I am very foolish,’ said the girl, taking up her tea, and labouring to disengage herself from her disappointment. ‘Of course he is sometimes engaged.’

She resumed her book, and Mrs. Cassilys returned to the fire. Some five minutes passed, and then Marcella rose.

‘I am going downstairs to play a little, mamma,’ she said, and before long the stray sounds of practising of difficult music stole from the drawing-room to Mrs. Cassilys in the library.

‘Odd, that Marcella should leave her book to go and practise,’ thought Mrs. Cassilys; ‘but—girls in love!’

At dinner time Marcella was again herself and made a jest of her chagrin.

The date of the dinner came and passed. Once or twice in the course of the evening Marcella thought, ‘If he had been here!’ and heaved a little sigh.

Then the days followed one by one. Laurier did not call. ‘Of course he is very, very busy,’ said Miss Cassilys. But she stayed at home, a little more than usual, hoping he might come.

At length one afternoon, when she had been shopping with her mother, on their return, they found some cards on the hall slab. Mrs. Craven, Miss Craven, Mr. Guy Laurier.

Marcella paled, and in silence lay down the card.

About a week later Mrs. Cassilys said at breakfast, 'I have written again to ask Mr. Laurier.'

They went that afternoon to a *matinée musicale*. On their return the first thing Marcella did on entering the house was to ask, 'Are there any letters?'

'Only one, Miss, for Mistress.'

Marcella took the letter from the slab. 'This is it,' she said; 'you had better open it, mamma.'

Mrs. Cassilys opened the envelope. Marcella stood watching, her face all anxiety. The note perused, her mother looked up.

Marcella anticipated her. 'You need not tell

me. I have guessed,' she said in a low voice, 'but let me read it.'

Mrs. Cassilys put the note in her hand.

'Mamma, does he not wish to come here?' asked the girl, piteously.

'These men are so busy, dear.'

'But, you said you wrote rather cordially, and, so formal a reply!'

That had struck Mrs. Cassilys; but she had forborne to say it. They had passed into the drawing-room, and Marcella sat down on a settee. Her warm sealskin was hastily unfastened and thrown back from her shoulders, and again she read the short note, attempting to find meaning between its few lines. She was still so seated, with the note in her lap, when the gong sounded for dinner.

Dinner was over, dessert on the table. In the middle of a long silence Marcella, peeling a pear, observed, slowly, without looking up,

'We may as well tell ourselves the truth,

mamma. Mr. Laurier does not wish to come here. *I am sure of it.*'

'If so, Marcella, a man's love that cools in a couple of months is not worth much, nor any great thing lost.'

'No,'—evasively.

Afterwards, in the drawing-room, she said, 'Mamma, I am going to lie down and think awhile.'

'Very well, dear.'

Marcella went into the unlighted back drawing-room and lay herself on the sofa. The hours of the evening stole by, and Mrs. Cassilys surmised she had fallen asleep. But that was not so. As her mother began to consider the advisability of awakening her, Marcella came back, pallid and thought-worn. Mrs. Cassilys eyed her with some anxiety.

'You are weary, dear,' she said.

'Yes, weary, weary, weary. It is folly to love. I was before happier by far.'

She leaned her shapely form against the

mantel-shelf, and lifting her dress held her delicate feet, chilled in the other room, in turn, before the flames.

‘Of course, little goose,’ said Mrs. Cassilys, ‘“true love”—you know.’

‘Little goose, little fool, poor little fool, that I am,’ returned the girl bitterly, ‘poor little fool, wishing to give him half my happiness for the privilege of bearing half his pains. I *do* love him, but,’ she turned her proud face to her mother, and continued with a mixture of passion in her voice, ‘if he will slight me, I’ll have his love out of my heart, if I tear my life up with it. I dare say he is chuckling now to think how “that girl” would like to make him come and woo her, and how much better he knows than to be so great a fool.’

‘Is he that sort of man, Marcella?’ asked Mrs. Cassilys, in a tone approaching rebuke.

‘No, mamma, not at all. Oh, dear! One should not speak evil of those one loves when there is no opportunity of asking their pardon’

—she came to her mother's side—‘Mamma, I do not mean what I said. I was unjust, and I do not wish to cry, and so I am going to bed. Good-night.’

It is well for the women who are not too proud for tears. What this haughty nature was bearing, was something fell indeed. For her there was no helpful self-deceiving to lend gentler aspects to cutting truths, no refuge of passion and railing on things, to tide over the evil time. He had loved her. She knew it. She loved him, profoundly. He was shunning her. She was sure of it. He would cease to love her, as a natural consequence. And so would be broken up the beautiful, strong love that should have wedded two lives together, and sunned them both. Because they had not been able to stay three or four days longer together at Wyvenhome, both would suffer a great loss, so long as both should live. And no tears could wash the loss away, and no wailing amend it.

If he had never cared for her, if she had loved him less, if she had ever seen another man to whom her nature could give itself as to him, the case had been other far ;— but to have been created for him, and loved by him, and then, in the consciousness of her acme of beauty and strength and love, to be thrust aside !

But since it was so, her only wisdom was to speak truth with herself, and school her courage to bear what was come.

So day by day the girl battled on in her truth and pride, mostly alone ; forced out of her memory what she could, sunned her life in her own pleasures, pale sunshine now, and strove to be bright with the many happinesses she had, instead of repining for better ones which she had not. It was the conduct of a nature of steel, but it was bitter work. For the world had lost its brightness, and art its spell of charm, and the music of life had grown faint and weird, and its colourless stream rolled

leaden beneath leaden clouds, and her labour to make it otherwise was vain.

The time was long, it seemed, interminably long.

One Saturday she much surprised her mother by saying, at breakfast, 'Now, if Mr. Laurier call to-day—we shall know.'

'Why should he call to-day?'

'Did you not see him last night at the theatre? He was just behind us in the crush coming out. I saw him, and he must have seen me, though he made as if he had not. When we were standing still I took the opportunity to tell Mrs. Craven we were this afternoon going to a morning performance. So if Mr. Laurier wishes to find us out when he calls he has received a useful hint. He owes you a call, for your last invitation, and we shall see.'

'Extremely amusing, my dear,' replied Mrs. Cassilys, 'especially for me, who am expected to do all in my power to bring you two wrong-headed young people together,

whilst you do all in your power to keep away from each other. I'm sure I feel much obliged by your valuable co-operation.'

In the afternoon at the play Mrs. Cassilys found Mr. Craven in the stall next her. It was some time since they had met. During the music between the acts he said to her, *sotto voce*,

'Your daughter is looking far from well, Mrs. Cassilys.'

'You think so?' was the surprised rejoinder.

'She seems to me pale, and to be growing thin.'

Mrs. Cassilys spent a couple of minutes in an attentive survey of her daughter. Till attention is called to them, changes are easily overlooked by those who see a face every day. But now Mrs. Cassilys found her girl so distinctly paler and thinner, and in general appearance out of good health, that she marvelled how it had been possible for her not to have observed it.

On their return from the theatre they found a gentleman's card on the hall slab.

Mr. Guy Laurier.

Marcella took it up, and read it, more than once. Then she said,

‘Thank you, sir. Now I understand you.’

She tore the card in two, and threw it into the hall stove.

Dinner passed almost in silence.

After dinner, Marcella sat long motionless on the ottoman before the drawing-room fire. Then she turned abruptly to her mother, and said,

‘Mamma, I should like to go to Italy.’

‘Well, if you wish it, love.’

‘I do wish it, much.’

Her mother rose and approaching sat herself at her side.

‘Marcella,’ she said, coaxing the girl into her caressing arms, ‘I am not so sure as you—about—Mr. Laurier.’

‘Don’t name him. Oh, to think that I have

thrown my best, my first, my pride of love, my all, to a man who can take a hint from my own lips to put a slight on me. I have well sunk from what I used to be. Thank heaven, I am cured of love. Never shall my brain think for any man the thoughts that I, poor humbled fool, have thought for him.'

She let her beautiful figure sink on her mother's breast, and, laying her handsome head on her shoulder, almost moaned,

'And I could have loved him so well, so well.'

Her voice sank away in a whisper, that died into long silence.

At last she again raised herself. Mrs. Cassilys still held her hand.

'Could we go on Monday week, mamma, or even at the end of next week? If it would not inconvenience you.'

'It will not inconvenience me, dear, but——'

'No, mother dear, let me go. No creature

knows what I have borne this last month. I have seen it all along, from the hour of Mr. Laurier's first refusal to come here ; and I have held up against it with all my strength and skill. I have pushed the distress from me, and diverted myself—read, studied, played, gone out, danced, ridden, kept quiet, been still, thoughtful, hopeful, lovingly, all these weary, weary days that I have had to be—without him—never near him—never to see him—never once to hear the sound of his voice—and now I have exhausted everything that could keep up my spirits and maintain my courage bright. Till now I have kept hope alive—but it has been vain hope, and now it is dead ; and he must and shall go from my love. It is an awful blow for me, I feel as though I were breaking beneath it. I have loved him so—and you *must* give me all the help you can.'

‘ Marcella, wait a *little* longer.’

The girl shook her head. ‘ What is the use of self-deceit, mamma ? We know the truth.’

‘I am not so certain of that. Is Mr. Laurier keeping away from you, simply because he does love you, and fears you will resent it?’

‘Do you suppose I have not thought of that? If it were so, he could not have been the ice he has been. I have seen men in that case before.’

‘He is a hard man, Marcella.’

‘I know that.’

‘Have patience, dear.’

‘I would, mamma, have great patience for his love, but’—she concluded in a different tone—‘not for his slights.’

‘Women who have earned men’s love have borne harder things than slights, Marcella.’

‘Then they were made of stuff other than enters into my composition. I can love, as well as the worthiest of them, but the man who wants my love shall crave it at my feet.’

‘Ah, Marcella!’ Mrs. Cassilys shook her head. ‘Well, now, lassie,’ she continued, ‘you must choose. You know what appears best to

you. I will frankly tell you what seems best to me : Wait. If your strength will not suffice for that, by all means let us go to Italy, for—you are not the woman to be that man's wife. Now, will you for his sake wait ?'

'For the sake of the man who has slighted me and the friendship I gave him ?'

'For the chance of making the happiness of the man you love.'

It was long before the girl replied. At last, however, she said,

'You ask a very cruel thing. But I will not be found wanting in courage. I will wait. If it can bring him and me together, if it can make me worthier of him, if it be for our happiness, I shall not grudge it.'

CHAPTER XI.

As if by fatality, the same evening's post brought Marcella an invitation of a nature most unanticipated. Lady Julia wrote to request her to spend a fortnight at Sritten Court.

'Go, dear,' said Mrs. Cassilys on the spot. 'A liking for any one taken under such circumstances as those in which Lady Julia unbent for you means a friend for life.'

So Marcella went.

She found Lady Julia altered, aged, more decrepit, broken in feature and voice, and with a presence far other than that which she formerly possessed.

In truth the poor lady was but the ghost of herself. Her time since her son's death had been spent in solitude, and, save on the one

drear day of his funeral, she had scarcely since seen a soul to speak to. No relations belonged to her, either on her own side or her husband's, who would not in some way profit by her loss, and her pride refused to bear the sight of their mourning and the sounds of their condolences. In that long, unwholesome loneliness, though still stern of command, she became in spirit terribly bowed, and, in thought, lost to all but a maze of aimless regrets for the unalterable past.

Keppel was at Sritten Court, for a few days, on business, and Lady Julia's medical man spoke with him on the subject, seriously.

'You cannot continue to live like this, Lady Julia,' said Keppel, in consequence—she would bear more from him than from any one else—'this melancholy and this perpetual loneliness are dangerous. You must either take change of air, or have someone to stay with you.'

'I have no one to ask. You know what I mean.'

Keppel considered.

‘There is one person, whom you might ask,’ he said at length, ‘Miss Cassilys.’

‘Humph. After having said she should never come under my roof?’

‘That has nothing to do with it. Nobody knows that except perhaps Miss Cassilys, who is not the sort of person to remember such speeches. Now, listen to reason. You unbent to the girl. You were struck with her. She has behaved well. She was not to blame. What she had done, was only what you and I desired; yet she submitted to bear the burden and heat of the obloquy. That was a spirited action—and remember she might have done very differently. She is agreeable, she is well bred, if not well born, and she is well educated. She has no relatives to be a plague to you. You will easily do worse than ask her. If you do it you will see she will do you good, and I shall be very glad to hear she has been invited.’

Lady Julia was silent.

She did not intend to invite Miss Cassilys, but again and again in those cheerless days the remembrance of the girl, with her proud pale face, and her measured voice, and of the thoughtfulness, and the tender gentleness of the only being for whose sake her own haughtiness had stooped, flitted about her. Nature attaches us to those for whom we have made sacrifices, and Lady Julia began to feel she would be pleased to see Marcella again. But to invite her—that was not possible. Then after this again she would mourn her folly, and her miserable life, and in her bitter loneliness wish someone would come—someone, not like Keppel, but some quiet, thoughtful, gentle soul, something young, to lighten the burden of her many and lone years. So at last a letter was written to Marcella, but not sent. ‘I cannot,’ said Lady Julia, after the envelope was sealed, and threw the note into the fire. Then another was written, and likewise burnt,

this time the excuse, 'She would not come.' But the third, despatched on the morrow, brought Marcella to Sritten Court.

Lady Julia gave her a cordial welcome. In the enormous drawing-room, for some half-hour, before parting to dress for dinner, they had a pleasant chat, and began at once to draw to each other. But at dinner all that was changed. Lady Julia was polite, with great ceremony, but otherwise ice and polar frigidity. When, after dinner, she stood aside for Marcella to precede her from the room, it was with an air that spoke aloud, 'Feel, little plebeian, how fine a thing it is to precede an earl's daughter out of a room.'

In the drawing-room she sat herself in her own large chair by the hearth, pointing Miss Cassilys to one opposite. Tea and coffee were served amid silence, and then Lady Julia's eyelids closed, and she sank back in her chair.

Very quiet sat Marcella, with her feet

on the foot-rest, and her eyes watching the flames, believing her ladyship asleep, and amusing herself to work out tangled themes of thought, of her own proud love and its broken course, and the strangeness of her presence where she found herself. Once or twice she rose, and as noiselessly as circumstances would permit restored the sinking fire. Also, when the servant came to remove the tea things, she held up her hand in warning that Lady Julia should not be wakened, and that was all.

At eleven Lady Julia opened her eyes.

‘Will you take anything more before you go to your room, Miss Cassilys?’ she asked.

Marcella declined. Lady Julia rang for the lady’s-maid to attend her to her room, and then, a little hesitatingly offering her hand, wished her a ceremonious ‘Good-night.’

Breakfast like dinner. After breakfast it was suggested they should walk. But when Marcella was dressed, a message informed her Lady Julia did not feel equal to going out this

morning, and Marcella walked in the grounds alone for a couple of hours. It was a rough, windy day; but the exercise, combined with change of scene, did her good, and she returned to luncheon in better spirits than of late. At luncheon Lady Julia did not appear, but wished to know whether Miss Cassilys would drive or ride. Having had a good walk, Marcella preferred to remain indoors to read and to write to her mother. At dinner-time Lady Julia came into the drawing-room with some mumbled, stumbling apologies, and a chilly ceremonious meal ensued.

Marcella found this dull? Not exactly. She had not come anticipating gaiety, but partly to be quiet, to have change and a new solitude, partly with a hope of finding opportunity to show a consciousness of the consideration she had received from Lady Julia. She trusted her demeanour was doing the latter; for the former, the austere stateliness of Sritten Court was quietude itself.

Anticipating another after-dinner nap on the part of her hostess, she had set aside for the quiet hours, some thoughts that had presented themselves in the course of her reading, but this time Lady Julia disappointed her of her reverie.

In effect the old lady had had it brought to her mind that her sham nap of the previous evening had been a mistake. It was her intention to be immensely courteous to Miss Cassilys, and consistently with this, the previous evening's first consideration should have been the amusement of her guest. Only the wilful old woman was disinclined to be so very particularly attentive to this insignificant granddaughter of a brewer. In consequence she had brought herself out of the difficulty by feigning to go to sleep. Now she saw she had been making the girl too familiar.

This evening she was wiser, and kept her eyes open. The coffee removed, she asked, 'Would Miss Cassilys play or sing?' Miss

Cassilys did not sing, but would play. What was Lady Julia's favourite music? Reply polite, but evasive. Marcella went to the piano and played. She believed Lady Julia would fall asleep, and chose pieces of the softest, dreamiest kind; stilling lullabies of faint strains, and, for the first time since her son's death, Lady Julia found herself lifted out of herself by the plaintive, calming melody.

'The girl,' she thinks, 'plays prettily. Ten, twenty, twenty-three, no, five years since I heard that aria. A light touch. She thinks I am falling asleep. A thoughtful-natured lass. Ah, that is "*Vedrai amico*." She certainly has a great deal of feeling. Musical professionals among her relatives very likely.'

At the end of half an hour Marcella returned to the fire. Lady Julia said, 'Thank you,' and asked, 'You are fond of music?' To which Marcella replied in the affirmative, and so they fell into conversation. Miss Cassilys's thoughtfulness without affectation,

and her happy, vigorous nature began to come into view, and Lady Julia became interested. The talk took a more personal tone. Lady Julia asked of her home, her pursuits, her education, her travels, her tastes and distastes. Marcella replied frankly and unassumingly with a pretty, graceful respectfulness that became her beauty of person and cultivated speech to a degree that rendered her charming.

Presently, as they spoke of books and reading, a light broke upon Marcella. Lady Julia was a tremendous prude, strict of a strictness unheard of. This was the first fact concerning her real ladyship Marcella ascertained.

Lady Julia asked of her mother, and the girl's reply prompted the question,

‘You love your mother very much, Miss Cassilys?’

‘Oh, yes,’ said the girl in a way that showed it was not a subject for words.

‘Tell me how you and your mother spend your evenings.’

Marcella commenced. They went out a good deal, and entertained frequently. At other times they read, played music and games, sometimes only worked and talked together. Only as she told it, it sounded like some story from fairyland.

‘Come here, my dear,’ said Lady Julia, pointing to a low chair by her side.

Wonderingly Marcella did as she was requested. The old woman took her hand and drew her arm on to the arm of her chair.

‘Tell me, now, how your mother made you love her so.’

A look from Marcella, with wide eyes, for Lady Julia’s face was turned away from her to the fire. Then with, ‘I fear, Lady Julia, I cannot; you should know mamma,’ she commenced so simple a story of unpretending kindness, and grew so eloquent in it, that the old woman’s heart was nigh to bursting. After

which she sat, for the rest of the evening, taciturn, wearily gazing into the flames.

To Marcella that appeared unwholesome. Accordingly, the next evening (they had been for a drive, and Lady Julia had entirely recovered her icy mood), on the repetition after dinner of the formal, ‘What would you like to do, Miss Cassilys?’ Marcella, mindful of a stray remark once dropped by Rintearn, which had come to her whilst puzzling how to be companionable to her hostess, suggested a game of chess.

Lady Julia beat her. Then she beat Lady Julia, and made a second discovery—that Lady Julia much disliked to be beaten at chess. After that Lady Julia generally won, and, becoming impressed with Miss Cassilys’s unskilfulness, began to suggest moves, and in short to teach her how to play. When Marcella did what Lady Julia advised she won, and when she was left to herself she almost always lost. By degrees the old lady

became very much amused, and laughed at her mistakes, and at the solemn face she would put on, when shown she had committed an obvious blunder.

‘Ah, Miss Cassilys,’ she would say, ‘you are a clever girl, but you will never make a chess player.’

And so over the chess-board, for they played every night, the old woman at last shook herself free of her pride, and gave her heart, secretly only it is true, to the girl.

That was not done at once, nor without many a reluctance, and a considerable amount of hauteur intervening between unexpected advances, and once (it brought the crimson to Marcella’s cheeks) something said about a brewery of which Lady Julia afterwards felt as heartily ashamed as she had every reason to be.

What won her was Marcella’s way ; not a mere grace of artlessness, but the bending of the quiet, stately pride of the wealthy, hand-

somely-dressed, luxurious, cultivated girl, who, meet in everything but birth to be herself a daughter of the house, unequivocally accepted her want of that one unattainable thing, descent, and bore herself gracefully but unhesitatingly inferior to Lady Julia, and, however proud herself, never forgot, neither in the moments of ceremoniousness nor in those of familiarity, that her hostess was a noble and herself a nobody.

Lady Julia had a way of saying things regardless of how they might strike the hearers, and one evening asked her,

‘Did you ever hear, Miss Cassilys, that I once said you should never enter this house?’

‘I heard it; and I thought it just.’

‘H’m. Then you were surprised, or—at least, what did you think when you got my invitation?’

‘Surely, Lady Julia, that is quite another thing,’ replied Marcella, composedly. ‘To come here as your guest is an honour for me, to pre-

sent myself as future mistress would have been a gross impertinence.'

'That is sense, my dear,' replied the old woman, 'and does your heart credit as well as your head.'

During one of their afternoon drives the church spire came in view, and Lady Julia remarked, 'I should like you to see our church. It well merits a visit, but—' she stopped, and concluded, 'very likely you will visit it alone.'

'I would rather with you.'

'I never go there now, Miss Cassilys,' replied the old lady, awkwardly.

In fact, not only had she not been to the church since her son's death, but had even given orders that her carriage should not pass that way. Marcella made some vague guess at her reason, and said, after a few seconds,

'You go, though, sometimes to see Mr. Rintearn's grave?'

Lady Julia shook her head.

‘Oh, but you should,’ said Marcella, thoughtfully. ‘If I were dead I hope someone who knew me would come now and then to see where I was lying.’

Lady Julia was trembling like a leaf.

‘Let me tell the footman we will drive to the church ; may I ?’ asked Marcella.

‘If you like, then.’

How often and how often had she wished, poor lady, to come, and dared not.

The gate was reached. Marcella gave Lady Julia her arm, and with slow steps they passed down the long avenue of elms, to where a little path branched to the left.

‘It is this way,’ said Lady Julia ; ‘all the Rintearns are buried together.’

A few yards more, and Lady Julia stopped. Where there was a long shadow of great bushy, sombre-green stone-pines, planted by some tree-fancying rector, a new mound closed a row of monuments and tombs with dates over four hundred years.

‘Oh, my son, my son,’ wailed Lady Julia in low tones.

A great lump was rising in Marcella’s throat, but she managed to choke it down.

All is forgiven the dead, and ill done them lies like lead on the memory of noble souls. As Marcella stood there, if there was anything in her whole life which she desired rather than aught else to be able to recall, it was the words she had from time to time spoken against him who slept below.

At last Lady Julia looked at her. Some word was demanded of her. At such times it is hard to speak anything worth speaking.

‘I am so glad of the stone-pines,’ said Marcella; ‘their shadows come here, you see, every day, and he loved them best of all the trees.’

‘Did he? I am glad of it. I never knew it,’ said the poor mother.

Was he glad, too, to sleep his long sleep under the stone-pines’ shadows, loved best

because it was beneath them that he had first spoken to Marcella his love ?

The following Sunday Marcella said, ‘ Lady Julia, will you not go to church ? ’

‘ Shall I ? ’

‘ Do, Lady Julia. If you will—it would be a pity for me to be there on the first occasion of your going—I will stay at home.’

That touched the old lady’s pride, and she went. Marcella remained at Sritten Court. By-and-by she intended to walk out to meet the returning carriage ; in the meantime she amused herself at the piano. But her thoughts strayed away from her music, and soon she turned on the music-stool, and resting on the piano fell into a reverie.

It was of Lady Julia, and her strange incongruous ways, kind, distant, friendly, formal, stiff, spiritless, and of the key to this conundrum. Long she puzzled it over, and, as she turned the problem again and again, by degrees it began to present features that suggested a

solution, and the suggestion as she reviewed it gathered convincing strength. Was it the truth that beneath this hard exterior lurked a great need of something to love? And had the gall of Lady Julia's life (for bitter as gall Marcella felt assured most of it had been, and in that was not mistaken) been that no one would ever let her love them?

At the end of a meditative half-hour Marcella was almost convinced it was so.

Yet surely someone would have been before this found, some brother, some sister, some niece, cousin, friend, to have accepted with gladness the gift of the proud old woman's sterling affection.

That how to be loved is an art of which very few are masters, Marcella Cassilys was not aware.

But the hour advanced, and it was time to go down towards the park gates if she intended to meet the carriage.

Two days later Marcella learned that her conjecture was correct.

She and Lady Julia were walking in a drive in the wood. It was a fine winter's afternoon, sunny and not very cold. Now, about half-past three, the sun had sunk below the tops of the trees, and its shining came to them, a bright spot amongst a great tangle of branches, not strong enough to cast any shadows, but strong enough nevertheless to fill the scene with delicate, tempered lights. Amongst the trees lurked a thin grey mist—it was turned to brown where the sun shone—that by rendering the trees and the underwood moist, and the stubbly grass by the path side humid and heavy, added much to the peculiar character of the winter scene. Dead leaves lay about, and little broken twigs, and a faint scent as of fungous growth rose from beneath the brushwood. Above the blue of the sky was pallid, but clear.

Busily talking, they had walked some way, Marcella full of praises for the beauty of the afternoon's delicate lights and shades, and of

the fantastic effects among the trees, and Lady Julia finding some reflected pleasure in the girl's enjoyment of her walk. At length Marcella suggested turning back. Lady Julia must be tired. She was ; but loth to shorten the girl's pleasure, she denied it.

‘ No, my dear, let us go a little farther ; it is a beautiful afternoon.’

‘ It is indeed,’ replied Marcella, appreciatively.

‘ What do they call you at home ?’ asked Lady Julia abruptly.

‘ Marcella.’ After a moment's thought she added, ‘ I wish you would call me Marcella, Lady Julia.’

‘ Why, Miss Cassilys ?’

The advance had been a bold one, and the response was forbidding, but Marcella did not lose courage. ‘ You have been more than kind to me,’ she said, ‘ and I should like it.’

But Lady Julia still called her Miss Cassilys. It is slowly that the aged indulge

themselves in the pleasure of a new friendship with the young: they have been so often disappointed.

As they on their return drew near the house Lady Julia stopped to give some orders to one of the gardeners. Marcella passed on a few paces and waited. Her orders given, Lady Julia turned to look for her companion.

She stood a little higher up the path, her face turned to the last red streaks of light, above the sun sunk in the west. In her deep grey eyes was a sort of uncertain regret, and her full lips had taken a mould of haughty distress, a proud bearing with pain. In herself she was musing, 'Oh, these days, these cruel days, that die in wearing down his love for me.' Then she saw Lady Julia, and turning from her own trouble, summoned a willing smile to her lips.

'Musing, Marcella?' asked Lady Julia.

'A little, Lady Julia,' replied Marcella, respectfully.

Before dinner her ladyship had come to a resolution. The sense of general dereliction is of the most intolerable to which a human being can be subjected, and her heart yearned towards the girl, and she determined to put her mettle to a final proof.

When they returned to the drawing-room after dinner, a little case stood conspicuously on the chess-table by Lady Julia's chair. Marcella saw it, but said nothing. The tea was taken away, and chess proposed. 'Will she say anything now?' wondered Lady Julia. But Marcella simply removed the casket to the nearest table, and began to set the men.

Then Lady Julia said, 'Bring me that little case, Miss Cassilys.'

Marcella pushed the men to one corner of the table and replaced the case. Lady Julia selected a key from her bunch, and unlocked, but did not open, the case. Then, taking the girl's hand, she drew her towards her, and retaining her hand whilst she spoke—she

had a marvellous command of her voice—said,

‘Marcella, I once had a daughter. Sometimes you remind me of what I used to hope she would be. I bought for her long ago a set of emeralds, but, you see, she has not remained with me to wear them, and you would do me much pleasure by accepting them for a memorial of me.’

She turned back the lid of the box with her disengaged hand.

A necklace, brooch, bracelets, and earrings of richest shimmering green, with tiny pencils of scintillation gleaming from the edges of their pellucid facets, lay glistening with light on crimson velvet.

That Marcella was not ignorant of the value of such things Lady Julia knew.

And now for the moment of proof. In the presence of so magnificent a present how would the girl behave?

Would she have the courage to accept

it? Would she know how to do so with grace?

Lady Julia was watching her face.

Immersed in thought, the girl regarded neither her nor the jewels, but held her eyes dropped with an air of reserve to the ground. But presently she raised them, and, turning them to Lady Julia, said, with a pretty smile of acceptance,

‘I thank you very much, Lady Julia, for so beautiful a present.’

She knelt at the old noblewoman’s knees, and first taking one earring from her ears, hesitated an instant, looked in Lady Julia’s face, and then laid it in her lap; and after it, in turn, the other, her necklace, and bracelets; and then, without a word, offering one wrist, looked again into Lady Julia’s face, with an asking smile that meant, ‘Will you not yourself deck me?’

One by one the old lady put on the bracelets about her fine wrists, the earrings in her

delicate ears, the necklace about her neck, and the brooch on her warm, heaving breast.

‘Dare I ask for a kiss?’ thought Marcella.

No, she dared not. She was right: it would have spoiled all she had done.

But she pushed a low footstool before Lady Julia’s chair, and, seated there like a child at her feet, talked with her, now looking up in her face, and now leaning her shoulders against the old woman’s knees, whilst the latter toyed with her hands or her silken hair. That night they played no chess.

After that the two were on a different footing, and casually, a day or two later, Lady Julia kissed her. Her stay at Sritten Court was extended to three weeks, and very odd at times was the manner in which her hostess’s old pride appeared beside her new kindness, amounting to absolute indulgence. Marcella, herself extremely careful to maintain a demeanour of unaltered respect, began to conjecture that Lady Julia had deliberately spoiled

her husband and son, and then lost their affection by resenting the insouciance she had herself injudiciously created.

At length the day of return to town came. Poor Marcella! she had found balm for Lady Julia's trouble, but none at all for her own. Rather, away from her home, she seemed to have missed some help that lurked about among familiar things. To her eager history of all that had occurred, Mrs. Cassilys replied with concern,

‘But yourself, dear? I should have liked to see you looking better for your change.’

‘Yes, mamma, I know. But you must not expect me to look what I do not feel.’

CHAPTER XII.

WHEN Tibullus told his Delia of tender cheeks, a man in love might go safe and heaven-shielded everywhere, he must have known he lied. No man walks in greater peril; and that, a little while after Christmas, Laurier was destined to discover.

He accepted an invitation to a certain ball. That was done with the most excellent of motives. A little dancing and a little flirting are confessed by all the experienced to be among the best antidotes to the tender passion. But the consequences of events have no connection with their causes.

Conducting his partner to her chaperone, after the second waltz, Laurier became aware of a lady bowing, in the most marked manner,

to himself, as he passed her, and with a start of surprise recognised Mrs. Cassilys. Receiving the impression of a sort of twitch in the arm on which her hand rested, the girl at his side looked in Laurier's face, and observed, she believed, a slight pallor, and a sharp hardening of his features, as he returned the salute of some lady to her unknown.

For several seconds Laurier did not speak, and the girl, being of a both curious and accurate turn of mind, reckoned with herself, 'How much would I give to know what all that means? Four, five pairs of eight-button gloves? Scarcely five—four, gladly.'

To some young women gloves are a more accurate gauge of price than money, the latter being, so far as they can see, a commodity capriciously abundant and scanty in turns, and without definite relation to the value of the articles for which it is exchangeable.

For Laurier to speak to Mrs. Cassilys was undoubtedly necessary. As soon as his accurate-

you care to know, then,' she said at last, 'that is my view of life. I am a hedonist.'

'But, perhaps,' observed Laurier in a hesitating way, as though seeking some outlet from a mental *cul-de-sac*, 'you and I understand that word differently. How would you define pleasure?'

'Ah, now you will be able to laugh at me,' she answered smiling, 'I cannot define it. I have an idea of what a definition is, but nothing like logic enough to frame one.'

For once, however, Laurier had lost some of his inclination to raillery. 'Never mind logic,' he said; 'tell me, if you will, simply what you understand by pleasure.'

'Enjoyment of things of the kinds one does enjoy, objects grateful to the eyes, melodious sounds, fragrant scents, pleasant things to eat and to drink and to wear, agreeable sensations: the sense of health, strength, wealth, security, position: the consciousness of being respected and loved: a taste for art, some acquaintance with

history and science : pleasurable emotions : the whole consciousness of ability to take pleasure and to please : and so forth. Pleasures are a somewhat large order to enumerate.'

' You find life so full of pleasures ? '

' Full and running over.'

' No dull days and weeks ? '

' No, I am never dull. Pain, and sorrow of course we all meet, but those are not dull. And under ordinary circumstances I enjoy every hour, and could enjoy it ten times over.'

' Miss Cassilys, you must have a brain of steel, and the health of an immortal.'

' I do enjoy splendid health,' she answered with a certain pride, ' but, then, I take much greater care of it than most girls do at my age.'

' Because it conduces to your pleasure ? '

' Is not that a good reason ? '

Laurier wondered, ' Was she really in earnest ? ' It seemed so. He now asked,

' But, Miss Cassilys, have you no apprehension of some collapse at last, induced

The hostess's son came to ask a dance.

‘I am almost sure your card is full,’ he said, ‘but my mother has so many strangers here to-night that I have been compelled to seem a little inattentive to old friends; still, perhaps you have something——’

‘I have only one, and that is a kind of engagement and not an engagement—if someone else fail—but this is so discourteous——’

The man gladly accepted, however.

‘What is this half-engagement, Marcella?’ asked Mrs. Cassilys.

‘My idiocy. I have kept one waltz in case Mr. Laurier should have the courtesy to ask me before every girl in the room has her card full.’

‘I should not have done that, Marcella.’

At last they met. It was in a set of lancers; she on his left.

They bowed at first, with blank faces. But it was so pleasant once more to look in his hard, handsome face, so pleasant once more to see her grave grey eyes, that smiles came un-

bidden ; and then he offered his hand, and she put hers into it at once, and his eyes met hers lifted to them, and his fingers closed on her delicate fingers, warmly and strongly.

Then she turned away and talked to her partner.

Well ! of course she was angry. It was no marvel. His behaviour had had no sense.

He turned to his partner, and in a maze talked about he knew not what. With Miss Cassilys so near his brain was swimming.

And this the *dénoûment* of three months' self-torture, that her presence dazzled his thought !

They set to corners, and he turned her back to her place. Again, a second time. He cannot touch her, and take no notice of her.

' You are angry with me, Miss Cassilys,' he says ; ' is it not so ? '

She meditates giving him only that look of rebuke a stranger should have for a too familiar question, but instead she answers,

‘Not angry. I have simply lost faith in you.’

‘Well—you are right,’ he rejoins bitterly, and there is time to say no more.

Presently he sees her regard him, with the old look of her dark-grey eyes, only mixed with a something of reproach it never used to wear.

Beneath it his face changes, and though it all passes in a moment, she has seen it, and for that change, faint indication he is not all impassible to what she thinks, in silence forgives him a part of his unkindness.

As she passes in the last *grande-chaîne* she says, as with regret,

‘How *you* are changed!’

Then the lancers are concluded.

Freed from his partner, Laurier strayed out of the ball-room, and in the lobby leaned his back against the wall, seeming to watch the movement constantly passing before him, seeing nothing, and thinking,

‘In love, *éperdument*.’

The following waltz concluded, he approached Miss Cassilys to ask for a dance. It was with some misgiving. She had no dance to give him: he had come so late as to be almost discourteous. For his own part he did not know whether he was more glad or sorry. But she invited him to sit down a minute and talk, at the same time making room for him at her side. Mrs. Cassilys almost immediately dropped into a discussion with a lady on her left, and the two were at liberty to talk as they pleased.

Laurier asked after the party at Wyvenhome, and made some perfectly insignificant remarks; then suddenly, almost inadvertently, he said,

‘So you think me changed, Miss Cassilys?’

‘So changed that perhaps you and I had better forget things were ever otherwise.’

His gaze met hers an instant.

‘If you wish it, let it be so,’ he said with a hard, cool calmness that irritated her.

‘Nay,’ she replied, rousing herself; ‘that is not fair, to throw all the odium of an estrangement upon me. Again you are unlike yourself; you, who used to be so just. You labour to make it plain that to know mamma and me irks you—and then you say—let it be as *I* will.’

‘You misconstrue me, Miss Cassilys,’—in the same hard tone.

‘Do I? I hope I do. But why will you not come to see us? Why?’ She turned a little on the settee, and with a smile a trifle colder than of yore, but yet a smile, urged in a voice like that in which she had so many times spoken with him, ‘Tell me what have we done? I am not changed, and, surely, you have not forgotten me. You know I shall be the first to accept any reason, any truth. Tell me, please. Why have you been so loth to come?’

She could scarcely have said more, and to say so much had cost her a good deal; the more, that to see the face with which he heard her made her heart ache. Still she kept him

her gracious smile to the end, and then the sterner beauty of her face took the place of the smile, with a look of readiness to meet with sympathy whatever he might say.

Only he said nothing.

‘I can hardly believe,’ she now continued, with a different tone, ‘that you have gone over to the number of those in whose sight I am changed—because of Mr. Rintearn. It is not, I assure you, those whose regard I valued most that have tried to make of me a branded woman for my part in that. Some have tried, and very hard, and——’ she would not give him her confidence on that and stopped. ‘But these are people I have been well able to afford to see against me. Of all those who I believed would in my trouble rally round me with their friendship, and their help, there has not failed—but one.’

‘I?’

‘You—was it just?’

‘You must judge me as you please, Miss Cassilys,’ he answered.

She made him no reply, and after some trivial words, he left.

The ball came to an end and Marcella had seen no more of him. On the way home the only thing she said was, 'I am cold, cruelly cold.' In the dining-room she refused the warm soup that awaited her return, and only on Mrs. Cassilys's insistance could be persuaded to take a part of it.

'My poor girl,' said her mother, gently putting her arm about her neck, 'this has been a terrible evening for you.'

'Oh, don't speak of it. He has been ice, steel, flint with me. I am nothing to him. He has cured himself of all his liking for me, long, long ago. I am only staying here to be tortured. I had better, better far, go away and forget—if'—her voice dropped—'if I ever can forget.'

'Do you love him so very much, Marcella?' asked her mother in a voice that faltered.

Marcella looked up, almost impatiently, as

if her glance should say, 'Have you no consideration what pain you are giving me?'

Then she pushed away the soup, and got up, at the same time taking her shawl, and impatiently throwing it around her shoulders, before going into the cold hall.

'I would I had never seen his face, nor heard his name,' she said passionately. 'Why have you asked him here, mamma? Write and tell him he cannot come. He will thank you. He has broken my life, my happy life, and I——'

Her mother stood eyeing her.

'Hate him?' she suggested.

'No,' said the girl, dropping her eyes.

'And were he to come to-morrow, and ask you to be his wife, what would you say to him about the pain he has given you?'

Marcella thought a moment, and then replied,

'That I had forgotten it.'

Laurier's reflections.

‘I have not profited much by keeping away from Miss Cassilys. It might seem a contradiction to think I have lost not gained self-mastery in this matter, but I feel very much like it. Still, I think I kept my countenance. How long, I wonder, is this to continue. I wish I was not going there to dinner.’

But chance wrought a meeting before the dinner. There arrived a severe frost, and every skater in London hastened to enjoy the rare treat of good ice. The expanse of ice in town is small, and those who skate are likely to meet.

It was the second day of the skating, and all the experts had shaken off their first desuetude, and were again as entirely at their ease upon the ice as if it had never thawed. A hard, calm frost reigned in the atmosphere. At night a little snow had fallen, and fresh mantled the park in whiteness, giving the trees, seen from the windward side, the look of a

forest of white coralline. Above, the sky, leaden with still unfallen snow, made a grey canopy over the brilliant whiteness of earth; whilst all around shone the peculiar lights of a snowy scene, effects of the unsuspected brightness thrown off from the facets of the million crystals of the snow.

After skating some time, Laurier had got away from the general crowd to the regions where some adepts were practising figures, and others, far from adepts, learning to shuffle about on the ice. Among the latter two girls, one of whom could scarcely skate at all, took his attention, and a second look assured him they were Miss Cassilys and her cousin Miss Curteis, the former attempting to teach the latter to skate.

He turned away from his figure-skating and came up to them.

As he lifted his hat Marcella offered her hand with the pleasant smile that had gone with their old greetings at Wyvenhome, saying,

‘How do you do, Mr. Laurier,’ as if nothing had since intervened.

She had been telling herself that could she only be like herself, her life would turn back to the likeness of her old life. That was reckoning with a little too large a disregard to the tyrannies of Monsieur L’Amour, but it was spirited.

‘I can’t shake hands, Mr. Laurier,’ said Florelle. ‘It is all I can do to stand. Can you skate well?’

‘Tolerably.’

‘I wish you would teach me a little, then,’ returned Flo prettily. ‘My cousin has very good intentions, but that does not much help me to skate.’

‘I shall have much pleasure,’ said Laurier, and instantly repented of it.

‘It is very good of you to give up your own skating, Mr. Laurier,’ said Marcella.

He gave Flo half an hour’s lesson, which she afterwards described thus, ‘He was kind,

you know, about teaching me ; but not nice, not at all.'

Then he brought her back to where Marcella was waiting.

'A little teaching would do you good, Marcella,' said Florelle mischievously, a little elated to have learned some things her instructress did not know.

'Would you like it, Miss Cassilys?' asked Laurier.

More than once whilst teaching Florelle his eyes had wandered in search of Marcella, always when they found her to wake a sort of regret that she did herself so scant a justice in her skates.

'If you would be so kind, and if we are not spoiling all your own pleasure, I should like it much,' replied Marcella.

He bade Flo practise alone till they returned, and then, giving Marcella his arm, they skated away together to a part less observed than that where he had taught Flo.

Instinct made him tender with Miss Cassilys's shortcomings. As they passed through the medley of skaters a good many eyes turned to admire the handsome pair, and more than one voice observed, 'He skates very much better than she.' Then they drew out of the crowd, and the general tinkling roll of the skates sounded behind them, whilst their own made music in time on the ice.

'And now,' he said, when they had arrived where he wished, 'first, Miss Cassilys, do your skates suit you? It seems to me they do not.'

Though she remonstrated he knelt on the ice, and examined her skates, as, supporting herself on his shoulder, she gave first one and then the other of her finely-made feet into his hand. He refastened her skates, and suggested others in which she would be more free, and even ventured to rebuke her for coming on the ice in boots that afforded her ankles insufficient support.

Then he rose, and her lesson commenced.

He was plain spoken, found much fault, and was hard to please, not even accepting her best as satisfactory when it was not all it should be, and flatly informing her she had fallen into an ugly, awkward way, and would with difficulty cure herself of it, and learn what graceful skating was. Still, he confessed she improved. After a time he said,

‘Now, shall I teach you a figure?’

‘Do I know enough to be able to attempt figures?’

‘You will succeed as well as a good many people.’

She gave him the old questioning look.

‘No,’ she said, ‘that is not what you are thinking, nor what I wish. I must learn to skate more neatly, less “ungracefully,” that was the word you used, before I attempt figures.’

‘Well, that is the wisest way, but it will take long, most likely, longer than the frost will last.’

‘Then if that is wisest, why did you not advise me to do what is wisest?’

‘I made a mistake, Miss Cassilys. I have taught other ladies, and found them generally a little impatient—your cousin, for example; she has insisted on attempting figures; and for a moment I forgot that Miss Cassilys is not like the rest.’

‘If you once knew it, you should not have forgotten it, Mr. Laurier. Now come, let us begin again, and don’t be afraid to tell me the truth. It is good for us girls to learn patience. Sometimes’—her voice fell—‘we have more need of it than you would think.’

‘Not you, I hope, Miss Cassilys,’ he said kindly.

Indescribably gentle he was with her, and indescribably respectful and considerate of her, and she conscious of being so safe with him. It was the woman he loved that he had for pupil—he confessed it to himself if he kept it from her—the creature for whom, as he

looked in her beautiful face, and saw her soft cheeks coloured with the bracing air, he would rather drown than have her hurt whilst under his protection. And a pleasant thing it was to teach her new pleasures and graces, and to see all her powers and intelligences bent to come before his eyes to the hard perfection he demanded of her. .

There would be the deuce to pay by-and-by for this fooling and trifling about with her, for this holding her hands, and directing her feet, and touching her, and having her arm on his arm, and her shoulder against his ; but it was only for once, for half an hour, and his abstinence had been for weeks and months.

Presently she slipped, and but just saved herself, and then a second time ; so that she had had an awkward fall if he had not been prompt to catch her elbow in his hand.

‘Now I think you are getting tired,’ he said.

‘Well I am afraid I am,’ acknowledged Marcella reluctantly.

she was a young lady of experience, and managed to smile, an incredulous, jesting smile.

‘Are you mad, Mr. Curteis,’ she asked, ‘or only very impudent?’

‘Neither. I am in earnest. Of course I know nothing was said about it, only I thought there was a kind of tacit understanding.’

‘Really,’ rejoined Theo, archly and still incredulously; ‘and, if you please, on what grounds did you form that opinion?’

‘Oh, we’ll waive the grounds. But, seriously, Miss Stryne, I should never have thought of plaguing you if this other man had not come in the way. Only, you know, you will have me, won’t you?’

Hammerbratsch returned too soon for any reply, and the conversation once more became a rattle of nothings, spiced with some very pointed compliments, on the part of Hammerbratsch, to Miss Stryne.

‘Oh, Mr. Hammerbratsch,’ said Theo

presently, 'there is papa. Do go and tell him—you don't mind my asking you, do you?'—this most persuasively—'do go and tell him Mr. Curteis is here. Don't let him go away till he has seen him.'

Hammerbratsch left them quickening his pace. Theo and Charley followed in the same direction, more slowly.

'Now,' quoth Charley, 'we recommence where we left off, and it is your turn to answer, Miss Stryne.'

'Certainly, Mr. Curteis,' rejoined Theo with spirit, 'you have an original method of courtship.'

'Well, and yours was an original method of making my acquaintance.'

'I fear I then made a great mistake,' she replied, for the first time speaking seriously.

'Don't say that till I have given you reason for it, Miss Stryne,' replied Charley, in a tone the same as her own. 'Now the time is short, we won't quarrel. One of these days you and I will be married, will we not?'

CHAPTER XIII.

BEFORE the date of Mrs. Cassilys's dinner an invitation came for Laurier from Keppel to dine with him at his rooms.

Laurier went. The twice or thrice he and Keppel had met had been at a club, and it was the first time he had been in Keppel's own quarters. That they were enviable in the extreme did not surprise him, Keppel was the sort of man to have everything about him of the best procurable ; but Laurier was not prepared for the luxury passing measure in which he found himself.

Keppel gave him a dinner the best *cuisine* in London could rival only, not surpass. Two other men were there—an officer, a very marvel of anecdote, and voracity, who kept them in a

laugh all dinner-time, and a thin-faced youth with a pointed chin, who was grandiloquent on gambling. After dinner these two left, and Keppel and Laurier remained alone.

They removed to the little drawing-room, a sumptuous place which it had cost a fortune to furnish, Louis Quinze without an anachronism—except its inmates.

‘I wish, Laurier, you would sometimes come to see me,’ said Keppel; ‘I am a bird of passage, but my servants shall let you know when I am here. At any time when you could come it would give me pleasure to see you. You perceive the kind of men, of whom I see more than I care for, these military *bavardeurs*, and dolts to whom I am compelled to be civil for the sake of their set. Now let me hear all about yourself.’

He began a number of questions. What had this firm sent him? What had Mr. So-and-So done? Did Lord such an one keep his promise? Was the introduction to Mr.

Justice — of any real service? And so forth. Next: What had Laurier been doing? In which cases had he been retained? As senior or junior? In which courts? With what successes? Into the whole he entered with the concernment and zest of an influential man who has taken up a younger one's interests. At the end he said,

‘You ought to do well, Laurier. I hope you may. I know very little about the working of your profession, but when you want anything in the way of introductions, or a friend at court, apply to me—mark me, I mean it. My influence is not of a very tangible kind, but in some quarters it goes a long way; and as it has cost me enough there is no reason why someone should not reap the benefit.’

Laurier commenced an expression of thanks.

‘Please let that pass,’ interrupted Keppel; ‘we will talk of something else. You are not looking well, and you are not quite yourself. How is that?’

‘Several men tell me so. I have had some hard work. But I am not aware that any very tangible cause for any alteration in my personal appearance exists,’ laughed Laurier.

‘Ah, but causes are not all tangible, my dear man. I’ll tell you what I think about it, Laurier. When you and I met in Paris, why would you not come to *déjeuner* with Mademoiselle Raouzelle?’

‘I don’t affect that sort of thing,’ was the quiet reply.

‘All nonsense, Laurier; you are making a mistake. I am not the first man who has told you so, I know.’

He added more, and all to the same effect, persuasive if anything could be to that to which his hearer was unwilling to be persuaded. Laurier smoked his cigar, silent, except when he now and then assented to some question from Keppel with, ‘Yes—that is true.’

‘Laurier,’ said Keppel at last, ‘you are a man who means to emerge. You are perfectly

right. Take the advice of a man who has seen many men emerge. Make the tender passion keep in quarters of its own, apart from the serious affairs, the business and ambitions of life.'

'I have no intention of providing the said tender passion with any quarters.'

Keppel (he was leaning against the chimney-piece, with his back to the fire) drew his cigar from his lips, and pointing with it, held between his first and second fingers, towards Laurier, said,

'Now, Laurier, look here, you know better than that. At your age, with your experience, I mean after what your professional opportunities to observe have laid bare to you of men's lives, are you about to tell me that men fall in love or not as they choose?'

'Well—no—certainly not.'

'Do you suppose poor Jack would have come to his end if he had listened to me? You are exactly in Jack's predicament, Laurier.' ('That is truer than you think,' thought Laurier.) 'Once he was going to give passion

no quarter. Like him, you will one of these days find it will give you no quarter.'

Laurier made no response.

'It will end with your doing just the same as he. You don't like women. That won't help you. I don't like women—still—. Well, Laurier, you will vulgarly fall "over head and ears" in love with some girl. If she won't marry you there will be the deuce to pay. Time and energies and I know not what else squandered on fretting. And if she will marry you, what then? Now, honestly, what should you do with a woman?'

'I'm sure I don't know. As I have no intention of asking any woman to marry me, I have never concerned myself to think. I suppose I should do my best to make the animal happy.'

'I have not the least doubt you would,' rejoined Keppel sardonically; 'and a pretty occupation you will find it, something like alchemy, "an art that is no art, of which the

beginning is lying, the middle toil, and the end beggary." Treat a woman badly, Laurier, and the worse, the better she will love you, always provided you have once got her affection. However, "Think on't, man, think on't."

It was a little after midnight when Laurier left. The night was fine, the streets growing empty. The distance was not very great, and he decided to walk back to his chambers. Walking a man can think better.

Keppel's kindness was great. Since leaving Wyvenhome Laurier had learned a good deal about him. His set was exclusive, his acquaintances outside it not many, chiefly men much younger than himself, whom he believed men of talent (and his judgment seldom erred), and for whose benefit his really considerable influence seemed to exist. More strange, the men who were under obligations to him were seldom loth to confess it, and freely acknowledged their regret that the 'thus far shalt

thou come and no further ' of his manner had forbidden them to number among their friends the man they held first of their benefactors, and believed endowed beyond the ordinary with the qualifications—they grow daily rarer—that can make a man a friend of men.

Other men there were, who, when Keppel's name was mentioned, pressed their lips together, said nothing, and attempted to look as if they knew nothing. But these were few ; and every man has foes.

As for Keppel's views of the tender passion they were not new to Laurier, who was neither scandalised, nor affronted, nor persuaded. This was Keppel's way, and was nothing to him. Many other points of Keppel's polished, influential, useless life interested him more.

And Keppel's advice on that subject he tossed aside unconsidered. The consciousness of the woman he sincerely loves environs the thought of a man, and renders nauseous to him all passion except for her.

Charley had come to town, and thrown himself into work with a zest that was quite astonishing. He would sometimes draw a long face over certain classes of men with whom he had to meet, and looked mournful about giving up his crack West-End Club, but he was in excellent spirits about his enterprise, and vowed himself the ultimate gratification of making a fortune.

He went a good deal to his aunt's when he had time, and one of the things he naturally asked, on the occasion of one of his earliest visits, was what Mrs. Cassilys and Marcella saw of Laurier.

‘We see him very seldom,’ replied Mrs. Cassilys. ‘When we met at Wyvenhome I liked him, and since we have been in town I have twice asked him to dinner, but he has not been able to come.’

‘You liked him, did you not, Marcella?’

‘I thought him clever,’ replied Marcella, evasively.

‘He is an odd character,’ observed Charley. ‘I went a day or two ago to see him at his chambers. I thought we should have a pleasant talk about Wyvenhome and the shooting, and so on; but he did not seem to wish to talk about it. Then I said something about you and aunt, and he shut me up on the spot. I used to think he liked you; in fact, I’m sure he did, in his own queer way. I could not understand him a bit. I pitied the man, for he seemed to me utterly wretched and discontented, and at cross purposes with his life. Yet they tell me he is considered successful. I suppose he is overworking himself, but he seems to have become very difficult to understand. Have you noticed it, Marcella?’

‘I don’t think either Marcella or I have ever managed to understand him,’ replied Mrs. Cassilys, quickly, coming to her daughter’s assistance.

‘Well, I used to think I did,’ said Charley, ‘but I am not sure I do now. If he is like

this when he is at home, I fancy I begin to like him a good deal less than I did.'

'Don't say that, Charley,' put in Marcella, pleadingly, 'he may very possibly have just now some trouble of which we know nothing. I don't think you misjudged him.'

With which speech the conversation closed.

The dinner at Mrs. Cassilys's house proved an event almost eventless. Charley was there and took his cousin in to dinner. A confessed admirer of Miss Cassilys's was also there, and obtained some infinitesimal favours, due to nothing but pique at the manner in which she was being treated by Laurier. The guests sat where they pleased, and Laurier, who, if he had chosen, had at dinner the opportunity to sit next Marcella, purposely selected another part of the table and conscientiously devoted himself to his partner's amusement. With Marcella he was extremely on his guard, and his acted insouciance rose far above suspicion.

For her the evening was one of disappointments heaped upon disappointments, some of them—there is nothing more cruel—ridiculous in their thoroughness.

At one time, whilst two ladies were thumping through a noisy duet, to the distress of everyone in the room except themselves; the other women bearing it well; and the men with blank looks hanging about awkwardly; Laurier, sitting by one of the tables, took up a remarkably handsome book, and after a brief glance at the letterpress and the binding, turned back the cover as if to examine the fly-leaf.

‘Now he is looking,’ thought Marcella, ‘to see if that book is mine.’

A slight change of position permitted her keen-sighted eyes unobserved to watch what ensued. What Laurier sought was not on the fly-leaf, for he looked at the top and bottom corners of the cover. It was not there either, and he at once turned to the other end of the

book. Again the inside of the cover, and at the inner bottom corner he has found what he sought.

The name of the binder !

And he takes up the book and again scans its back, and again looks at the binder's name, the more surely to consign it to memory. Then laying down the book, without so much as a glance at its bookplate, he once more resigns himself to the noise.

And Marcella, with her handkerchief rending in her hands, has to think, 'Fool that I am ! Always imagining he must be thinking of me. Whether a book is mine or not, what does it matter to him ? He concerns himself as much about me as about a person who never existed.'

Empty of interest the slow evening passed away. Glad enough was Marcella when it at length reached its end.

And so came and went by the long-planned, much-anticipated dinner, on which love had

lavished thought for whole months, one great disappointment : not one of the things said or done that fancy had promised ; blighted every pretty, fluttering hope ; the whole scene blank, for Marcella could scarcely say what had happened, and its retrospect fit only for tears.

Even Mrs. Cassilys shook her head now. When Marcella said that evening, as she wished her mother ‘Good-night,’ ‘You see, I was right ;’ she only replied, ‘My poor darling, I fear it is vain to deny it. You *were* right.’

After long tensions come strong reactions. Marcella came down to breakfast the following morning with a face absolutely apathetic.

‘That girl is breaking her heart,’ thought Mrs. Cassilys.

Unwilling to leave her alone in her misery, after breakfast she went about the house seeking her. It was some time before she discovered her, in the dining-room, sitting sideways, leaning against the table, on which before her stood a little deal box. The screw-

driver with which its lid had been wrenched off lay at its side, whilst two or three odd-shaped bottles drawn from it lay on the table. One of them opened was in Marcella's hand. As her mother entered she looked up quickly, as if surprised.

The icy chill of a fear never before conceived shot through Mrs. Cassilys.

‘What are you doing, Marcella?’ she inquired, with a sinking voice.

‘This is the new wood-violet scent,’ replied Marcella, indifferently.

She idly leaned back, and closing her eyes lifted the little bottle to her nostrils, passing it backwards and forwards, now nearer, now farther from them.

Her mother stepped to her side, and taking the bottle from her smelt its contents.

‘It is better than the old, is it not?’ said Marcella, languidly.

It was very good; and, to Mrs. Cassilys's

indescribable relief, it was wood-violet scent and not anything else.

‘Will you take one of them?’ asked Marcella.

‘I fear, my dear, you are *very* unhappy,’ said Mrs. Cassilys, tenderly, putting down the tiny flask of scent and laying her hand caressingly on her girl’s shoulder.

‘Oh, no! I was thinking about this new scent,’ was the reply.

She took the bottle, and pouring a drop on her palm rubbed it over her hands and wrists, and then passed the scented fingers over her face and brows, and through her wavy hair, the sweet, fresh fragrance of the scent diffusing itself around her into the air of the room.

‘Delicious, mamma, is it not? Won’t you have some? Give me your handkerchief.—There now, mamma, smell that, is it not exquisite?’

‘Yes, it is very nice, dear. But you——’

Marcella was now pouring some of the scent on her own handkerchief.

‘I?’ she said, looking up. ‘Oh!’—this in the manner of a person who has anticipated something of importance, and heard something only trivial—‘I am—so so. I’m getting over it. I do love this scent’—putting the scented handkerchief to her face—‘take a bottle or two, mamma. Don’t you think Flo would like one? Where is she?’

‘Upstairs.’

‘I’ll take her one.’

She gathered up the box and the little flasks and went out of the room.

‘You certainly are a strange creature,’ soliloquised Mrs. Cassilys. ‘I’m very glad that wood-violet cures the heartache, but I don’t understand it.’

Did it cure the heartache?

Half-way up the stairs the poor child stopped to bite her lips, and lean her weary,

handsome head against the wall, whilst she covered her eyes with her hand—

‘Ach Scheiden, ach bitteres Scheiden !
Wer hat doch das Scheiden erdacht ?’

CHAPTER XIV.

LAURIER called again. Marcella asserted, and Mrs. Cassilys did not now dispute it, that this visit would also be timed not to find them at home. She was mistaken.

A disengaged afternoon occurred. Pondering how to use it, Laurier remembered it was Mrs. Cassilys's at-home day—she had taken care that he should remain under no misapprehension as to which that day was—and, before his mind was altogether made up about calling, he was on his way by rail to Addison Road.

It was about half-past three when he reached the house. A groom with three horses, two of them with side-saddles, stood near the steps. As Laurier crossed the hall the notes of sparkling music reverberated

through a partly-opened door. The servant introduced him into the back drawing-room, and went away. A minute later the music ceased.

Coming down stairs Mrs. Cassilys met Marcella.

‘It is Mr. Laurier,’ she said.

‘I know,’ replied Marcella ; ‘I cannot come and see him. I am going out for a ride with Flo, and am late. I have forgotten the time whilst playing.’

She passed her mother and went upstairs singing the air of what she had just been playing, ‘Tra-la-la-la, Tra-la-la.’

Mrs. Cassilys proceeded alone to the back drawing-room. In a few minutes Florelle came in in her riding-habit. Laurier and Mrs. Cassilys were talking art, apparently getting on together very pleasantly. Flo remarked that she was going to ride with her cousin, said a few words in reply to Laurier’s inquiries concerning her progress in skating, and then excused herself and left.

Laurier understood he was not going to see Miss Cassilys.

He stayed a quarter of an hour. Mrs. Cassilys wished him to see a new picture she had purchased for her dining-room, and they went thither to view it. When they had returned into the hall, as he was saying 'Good-bye,' Marcella, in her riding-habit, came down stairs.

That was not altogether by accident.

'You have been looking at mamma's new picture,' she said, as soon as they had shaken hands, 'what do you think of it?'

Laurier mentioned what he considered the best points in the picture.

'When are you coming to see my books?' asked Marcella.

She was fastening a new gauntlet, holding the other one in her gloved hand, and with eyes intent upon the button difficult to bring through the button-hole, did not look up as she spoke.

'Some day, I hope, Miss Cassilys.'

Surely there was in the way he looked at her something very far from indifference. So it appeared at least to Mrs. Cassilys, whose quick eyes had caught him at last off his guard.

Marcella concluded the fastening of one gauntlet, and commenced to draw on the other. Then, prompted by a sudden impulse, she said,

‘Will you come now?’ and she looked in his face for his answer.

‘You are just going out—I must not make you late for your ride——’

The ride was of no consequence. She was only going out for an hour with her cousin, and they had already put it off till almost too late; and so saying ‘Come,’ she led the way upstairs.

‘I shall leave Marcella to do the honours of her books herself,’ said Mrs. Cassilys, ‘afterwards she will bring you down to the drawing-room for a cup of tea.’

Marcella took Laurier upstairs and ushered him into the library.

‘Now, at last,’ she said, ‘you see me at home. This is my own “sanctum sanctorum,” where everything except mamma’s work-basket is mine. Is it pleasant?’

Laurier looked around him.

The lowering afternoon sun, thinly veiled in a haze, cast in through the western windows, adown the length of the room, a level light of wintry grey that wasted as it passed along the motley rows of books. Already the shades in the room deepened, and at the further end, where the opening between the bookshelves that screened it off permitted a glimpse into the ‘study’—the curtains of the bow windows had been drawn—flickering, ruddy lights cast by the flames on the furniture contrasted warmly with the cold and fading sunshine of the February afternoon.

Over all a *je ne sais quoi* of quiet and calm, of soothing shadows and gentle lights, of lines that fell in graceful proportions, a consciousness of things of price, of treasured store of fertile

human wit laid up for the mind's delight, an atmosphere of something not of books among the books, of pleasant scents, of fresh culled flowers, of music (for the library piano had been bought at last, and a piece of music was open on its stand), of luxury, of velvets, of pleasant things and sights, and of woman's grace, and, after all, of thoughtfulness.

‘Well,’ asked Marcella, ‘what do you think of my library?’

‘That it is like yourself, Miss Cassilys.’

Marcella looked pleased.

‘Now,’ she said, ‘come and see what books I have. You must not expect great rarities. Papa's notion of life was the same as mine. He used to say, “A library is a place of enjoyment,” and this is an intellectual banqueting-room, not a museum. Still I can show you a few books, bought not because they were rare, but although they were rare. See here is a beautiful book’—she drew from its place a Saint Évremond, a crimson quarto, with a cover

adorned with fleurs-de-lys, once the property of the royalty of France—‘I must show it you myself, but I will not touch it with these rough gloves.’

She hastened to draw off her gauntlets. One had not been buttoned, of the other the buttons clung to the new hard holes.

‘Would you unbutton this for me, please Mr. Laurier?’ she said, holding up her wrist to him, at the same time that she looked in his face.

His fingers trembled to deal with the leather clothing her tender skin; but the buttons were at length unfastened, and the gauntlet drawn off. Marcella opened the book.

‘Do you see what beautiful paper this is? Take up one leaf and feel it. Papa believed it was a unique copy. And look at the type, and the perfection of the impression. Are you susceptible to the charms of an *Édition de luxe*? Only a little I expect? I am sadly weak on the subject.’—She turned over a handful of

pages, and then, something catching her eye, paused, and, careful not to touch it, pointed to a line—‘*Nous avons plus d'intérêt à jouir du monde qu'à la connoître*’—‘I wonder,’ she observed, ‘whether papa noticed that?’ A rapid reference to the end of the book showed on a fly-leaf a note of the passage, with two little dashes against it. ‘Ah!’ quoth Marcella, ‘papa liked that.’

She replaced the book and proceeded to display others. It began to grow dark, and a servant was sent for to light the lamps. Slowly they passed down the library, Laurier frequently stopping to remark, ‘Ah, I see you have this’—‘Dear me, I have often wished to see that book:’ Marcella rejoined sometimes with questions, sometimes with observations that betrayed a wide and sympathetic, and—which impressed Laurier far more—an accurate acquaintance with many of her books, and the histories of their authors.

Yet in her manner there existed some-

thing unquiet. A faint blush would now and again mount her cheeks without any apparent cause, and Laurier caught her eyes essaying, as it were, with a kind of timidity, and at the same time shrinking to meet his.

He had no sense of what that implied, but there slowly began to break upon him, what he had never in the least suspected, that Miss Cassilys was a girl of the rarest education.

‘You continue to add to the library,’ he presently remarked, with respect to some books of quite recent date. ‘Do you yourself select the books?’

‘Oh dear no, Mr. Laurier. I should make the most stupid mistakes. Some of mamma’s literary friends advise me,’ and she ran over the names, as of intimate acquaintances, of half-a-dozen men, every one celebrated in English or French letters.

So these were the men this girl was accustomed to see.

They passed on from shelf to shelf, the girl's talk artlessly unfolding the beauty of her mind.

‘And now,’ she said, ‘here are my monitors, my “Memento morieris,” my warning how much wider pleasure is than my power to partake of it. These are papa's favourite Greek and Latin and Spanish books, that I shall never have time to learn to read.’

‘Why not? Latin and Greek can be learned.’

‘I should never have time to learn them perfectly enough to derive any pleasure from them, without sacrificing something else. No—I have my share of things—but those will never be a part of it.’

Laurier regarded her as if attempting to read something in her expression.

‘Do you know, Miss Cassilys,’ he said, ‘I have often wondered why you, with your voice, never sing. But I think I have come upon the reason. You judged that you would not have

time for vocal music and instrumental too, and chose the latter.'

'My father made me choose. He thought it better for me to become as perfect as I could in one accomplishment.'

She looked down with an expression of some thought, which she did not wish to impart, which she felt it her privilege to keep.

Laurier was silent. It seemed to him that within this nature at once so happy, so grave, so richly gifted, and dowered with so rare opportunities, there was no excellence that might not be contained.

At this point Florelle came in.

'Aunty,' she said, 'thinks it possible you would prefer to have tea up here,—as you have been up here nearly a couple of hours.'

It is superfluous to observe that the latter clause of this speech was not a piece of Mrs. Cassilys's message, but of Florelle's mischievousness, which was accompanied with the most delicious of little grimaces.

‘Yes, ask mamma to let us have tea up here,’ replied Marcella. As Florelle left she turned to Laurier and said, ‘Now I am sure you must be tired of standing so long. Come and sit by my fire. I have been so interested that I forgot all about the time.’

They proceeded to the hearth, and sat down one on either side of it. Tea and Mrs. Cassilys were slow to come, and they fell again into conversation. Pointing to some engravings hanging over the chimney-piece, Marcella presently asked, ‘What do you think of those?’

Laurier rose to inspect them. Among them was a fine line engraving of the ‘Vierge aux candélabres.’ Speaking of it, Laurier remarked,

‘I somehow suspect that rightly to appreciate these pictures of the Madonna one should be a Roman Catholic. What do you think, Miss Cassilys?’

‘Quite the contrary. I have little inclination

to turn Romanist, but had I much, the Virgins would deter me.'

'You mean Mariolatry?' suggested Laurier, for whom the question, considered from that standpoint, lost its interest.

'No,' she arranged herself still more idly in her chair, and looking down sideways at the fire, went on, 'I have no repugnance to worshipping the Virgin, but I cannot descend to the Virgins. They always appear to me fatal to any attempt to defend Romanism. Only imagine—that woman without a fault, by whom all things are known and understood, all but a goddess, and still thoughtful for the feeble hopes and fears of every one of us, pourtrayed as a thing with her hair done plain, with dolly's dull blue eyes, and bulging cheeks of a portentous red; or a timid blonde with weak lips, and mawkish hungry jaws, who has not known how to dress herself; or, worst of all, the namby-pamby French pensionnaire of Lourdes, in nondescript garments tied with a

sky-blue sash. The religion that can perpetrate such things must have something fundamentally wrong in it.'

Laurier stood looking down on her.

'Such as men are, such are their gods,' he said, after a pause, 'that is an old saying, is it not?'

'And a true one,' she assented.

'And such as a woman is, such is her Madonna, is that true too?'

Marcella hung her head nervously. 'You must not speak like that,' she said.

The next minute there was a sound of steps, Mrs. Cassilys and Flo, and the servant coming with the tea.

Laurier was gone. Marcella returned to her library fireside, and sat down again where she had sat with him. Ultimately nothing is explicable, and she wished now that she had gone for her ride.

There was something terribly humiliating

in loving as she did, where no spark of affection was offered in return.

The lamps had been turned low, and she preferred to let them remain so. In her present mood the irregular fire-light afforded her more congenial company. For a woman who bears in her heart an unrequited love, the soft melancholy of the vague appearances uncertain lights and fantastic shadows awake in a well-known room has always its spell of soothingness and relief. Slowly regrets melted into semi-consciousness of shadowed light and of vague, stray snatches of ideas that flitted by, caught at in vain. Her hands sank down by her knees, her cheek against the soft chair-back, insensibly her eyelids drooped, closed, and Marcella slept.

And Laurier?

He has gone too far—too far—too far. Now, when no retreat remains, he perceives it. Before he was right, wise, not to approach her.

But he kept on his guard in vain. Chances checkmated him. Now she holds him : her existence occupies him, her character fascinates him, and he can barely turn himself from her.

Altogether his mind misgives him. Her power over him is a thing he does not like to estimate. Her nature is a witchery to his, and nothing seems more probable than that under its influence he will play the fool.

All this walking up and down the platform at Addison Road.

What is the end to be?

Simply this—he loves her—and must learn to be content to love unloved. Other men have loved women they could not possess. He must pass into this class, and his love be of this kind.

Tired of standing he sat down.

On the next seat was a girl, a light symmetrical figure, daintily dressed. He could not see her face, but he observed that she

frequently turned her head to look over her shoulder at one particular entrance to the station. And now whilst he looked she rose briskly, and walked towards the point that had so much occupied her attention. Her dress was short, and he could see that, as she stepped, one narrow foot almost crossed before the other, as women walk only under the spell of some strong emotion of pleasure. And then he perceived a good-looking man in a light suit, who, as he approached, smiled from a little distance to the girl and raised his hat with an air of something more than mere courtesy. As they met, and shook hands, he said something for which the girl hung her head and coyly turned aside her face. For an instant she took his arm, and then, as she dropped her hand from it, he hers, and finally she his again. So they made a few steps, stopped, quickly wheeled round, and went towards the stairs, she walking at his side with longer, firmer steps, a contrast to the

nervous tread with which she had come forward to greet him, and so they passed out of sight.

We live in ignorance of the impressions we are making. Who would longer remember that meeting, the man the lady awaited, or the stranger who chanced to look on? Whom had her grace the more profoundly moved? Probably the latter.

For there are sacrifices which if they are to be made must not be understood; and to Laurier that meeting was a revelation. Miss Cassilys was never to wait with impatience his coming, never to turn away coy looks from him, never her step to take firmness at his side!

Instead, an icy myth of platonic love for—Mrs. Charles Curteis. For Marcella would marry. Why should she not? She was not divine. And then he would be in love ‘platonicallly’ with another man’s wife. He had seen often enough the end of that arrangement.

Platonic love is a lie. Love is only platonic *faute de mieux*.

What will he do then? Court her—an engaged girl—another man's betrothed—with the hope of making her break her faith? There are men foolish enough to think that dishonourable, and Laurier was one of their number. That was a course to him impossible. Conquer his passion, even now, then?

But how? His mind became silent. In effect, though he would not admit it, counsel failed him.

Days, weeks ensued of mere restlessness and irritation. Weeks of awakening every morning with a dull sense of something amiss, of toil estranged from aim, of racking expectation, fear, hope, misgiving, of seeing, of relief and disappointment at not seeing Miss Cassilys: and at the end of every day heart sickness of its vapidness.

Still as he wanted no manner of courage he steadily shunned her, assuring himself that

though his emancipation might take long, go free he would.

But in the interim set in an evil altogether new. He began to blunder.

Then, with a crash, came the *dénoûment*, a slovenly mess made of an important case (the first put in his hands by a large firm), owing to nothing but want of attention on his part.

Only attention had become the one thing he could no longer command.

‘This, Mr. Laurier, is extremely unfortunate for my client,’ observed the solicitor in a monotone.

The blow was staggering. Laurier was not the man to speak of it to anyone. Alone he weighed it accurately, made no secret from himself of its cause, and, with his own merciless hardness, took it, with a bitterness beyond gall, for a monition of insufficient stability in his own character for great successes at the bar.

By evening some of the highest of his ambitions had been set aside.

Then he fell out of humour with work, idled and procrastinated, whilst his existence sunk to a misery, broken, distressed, soured to its core.

It became a serious question, Was there *no* remedy?

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

FAIR AND FREE

VOL. III.



FAIR AND FREE

BY THE AUTHOR OF

‘A MODERN GREEK HEROINE’

*‘A maiden fair and free;
And for she was her father’s heir,
Full well she was y-cond the leir
Of mickle courtesy’*

DRAYTON

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

LONDON

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1882

FAIR AND FREE.



CHAPTER I.

CHARLEY received a letter from Theo. It was short, and not very explicit :

‘Dear Charley,—

‘Do please come to see me. I am in a most terrible fix, and there is no one else in the world who can help me out of it.

‘Your own loving THEO.

‘P.S.—I could meet you the day after to-morrow, on the Paignton sands, of course quite by accident.’

Charley announced important family busi-

ness at his office, and went down the same afternoon to Paignton.

A bright morning the next day found him and Miss Stryne strolling by the waves of Torbay.

Theo went straight to the point: 'Now, Charley, the case is this. Papa and mamma are both determined I shall marry Mr. Hammerbratsch. You see, he is very rich. Now, Charley, what on earth am I to do? You must understand I have kept Mr. Hammerbratsch waiting till he will wait no longer. In fact, I have refused him once, only not in a way that made it necessary for him to go away. But soon I shall have to say real, definite "Yes" or "No." He is awfully rich, and "No" will be very difficult for me to say.'

Lovers by thousands have made bitter misunderstandings and quarrelled for ever over words less difficult to construct awry than these. But this time the frank nature of the one, and the practical want of all nonsense in

the temperament of the other, put misunderstanding clean out of the way. Theo went on,

‘I don’t wish to promise to marry Mr. Hammerbratsch, but if I refuse him papa and mamma will know it, because Mr. Hammerbratsch will leave. I am sure he will leave. Then I shall be in a scrape. That is not all. Mamma will insist upon knowing why I refused him. You will say, “Don’t tell.” That is more easily said than done. You men don’t know of what a mother with a marriageable daughter on her hands is capable. Mamma would extract the truth, and after that she is just the character to carry me off on the spot to America to be married by machinery, or to have me sold to a Frenchman.’

‘I see,’ said Charley, perplexedly. He had not much fear of either of the catastrophes Theo named, but he could see she was in a difficulty, and his was not a nature fertile in invention.

‘Of course,’ continued Theo, ‘I know some

girls would simply say "Yes," and mean "No." I don't quite like that. Though, if I were not engaged, I should not so much mind doing it merely to keep him quiet; but now I, in a kind of way, belong to you, Charley, don't I, and——'

For all the rest she put her daintily gloved hand into his.

'No, don't do that, Theo. It is unworthy of you,' said Charley.

Theo looked down. 'Have you ever wondered, Charley,' she asked presently, 'why, of all the men I have seen, I liked you the best?'

'Because I never bothered you, I should say.'

Theo smiled. 'Partly for that, but more for something better than that, Charley. Because you are the only one who has ever thought I could be good.'

Good! He thought her something better than plain good.

'Well, Theo, but what are we going to do?' he asked.

‘Charley, I hate it, but I can see nothing but accepting Mr. Hammerbratsch. I will not marry him, I promise you, but I believe I shall have to say I will.’

‘No, no,’ insisted Charley. They walked two or three steps in silence, and he added, ‘I wish we were married, Theo.’

It was exactly what Theo herself was thinking, and she answered with a pretty grace, ‘So do I, Charley.’

‘If we were to get quietly married, Theo, should you mind it?’

‘If you could manage it, Charley, I should feel safe.’

‘You are coming up to town shortly. If I make all the necessary arrangements you agree to it?’

She bent her head in assent.

A few more words, and a long pressure of loving hands, and Theo was alone, with her many thoughts, on the brink of the great-hearted sea, the only friend that always weeps

to those who weep and smiles to those who smile.

Returned to town, Charley cast about him for a plan of action. Concerning being married, he knew only one thing for certain, that it was a ceremony performed in church. He had also a vague impression that to be clandestinely married was much more difficult than in days gone by, the Church and the law having, at some not very distant date, attached to holy matrimony a number of troublesome formalities that compelled a large degree of publicity.

Not being, however, of a character to distress himself, he waited without concern for a Sunday evening, when a walk of an hour's duration brought him into another part of the suburbs of London, more unknown to that in which he lived than the capital of one county is to that of the next. Some church bell began to ring for service, and he entered.

The building was empty with the exception of a man lighting the gas and another near the

door, ringing the bell. Charley addressed the latter, who stated himself to be the verger, and the dialogue proceeded as follows :

‘I want to be married, without its being known. How is that to be done?’

‘You’re not known hereabouts, sir?’ asked the verger, apparently quite accustomed to inquiries of the kind.

‘No.’

‘Then we can do that for you, sir, easy enough. You takes rooms for yourself and the young lady, sir. Then we puts up the banns “both of this parish.” We can do that next Sunday, and then to-morrow three weeks you can be married.’

‘Only I don’t want to be married in three weeks,’ objected Charley.

‘Banns holds good three months, sir ; any day within that time you please, sir.’

‘Where can I take rooms?’

‘I’ve a nice little room I lets to gentlemen, sir, and my brother he has another, as you’ll

want one for the young lady. If you'll leave something of yours and the young lady's, sir, if you please, to take possession. If you've not anything you would like to leave, I can sell you two hymn-books, sir, which is what I does for most gentlemen.'

'That is all right, is it?' inquired Charley, a little surprised.

'Oh yes, that is all right, sir,' replied the functionary, with a smile at Charley's innocence.

However, Charley preferred also to speak to the clergyman, who, he found, regarded his questions as an unnecessary and annoying expenditure of time, and, for the rest, corroborated the information of his subordinate. Charley paid two guineas for the rooms, five shillings for the hymn-books (in which he wrote his own name and Theo's respectively), and a trumpery fee of two shillings for the banns. After which he walked home a wiser man.

For three consecutive Sundays the congre-

gation of Saint ——'s, —— Street, were assured that Charles Curteis and Theodora Stryne were 'both of this parish,' and that if any of them knew cause or just impediment why these two persons should not be joined together in holy matrimony they were to declare it. As none of them, except the verger and the clergyman, had ever been aware till then that any such persons existed, the congregation had nothing to say on the subject, and Charley and Theo were in a position legally to become man and wife in twenty minutes at any date within the next three months they might be pleased to choose.

CHAPTER II.

It befel that Laurier went one Saturday afternoon to the Winter Exhibition of the Old Masters.

For a time he strolled about, little interested in reality, with a kind of anxiety, whether of hope or fear would be difficult to determine, but in public places always with him now, respecting Miss Cassilys's haply being there. Of whichever character, however, his fretful anticipations partook, they were fated this time to be accomplished. Suddenly he became aware that six paces off, before a Leonardo da Vinci, a tall girl in a tight-fitting jacket, and a small hat with some sort of gold coloured feather, was—Miss Cassilys.

Laurier turned at once, and left that part of

the gallery, but not without her catching sight of his back, and recognising him.

‘Mr. Laurier is here, mamma,’ she said to Mrs. Cassilys.

‘Would you like to leave, dear?’

‘No,’—indifferently.

Laurier did not at once quit the exhibition. There were several pictures he much wished to see, and he satisfied himself with avoiding Marcella. For a time he succeeded very well. Then he again came across her. The desire to approach and address her was almost irresistible, and, determined no longer to expose himself to temptation, he decided to go, and walked towards the vestibule. But an acquaintance meeting him, and detaining him in conversation, left him, as he turned after saying ‘Good-bye,’ face to face with Miss Cassilys, not two yards off.

She bowed, and he lifted his hat, and—for human endurance has limits—had timidly extended his hand a little way, when her disregard

of the action warned him she did not intend to shake hands. Mrs. Cassilys, standing behind her daughter, turned round and, which Marcella certainly would not have done, began immediately to talk of one of the nearest pictures. Together they examined that, and then a second, a third, a fourth.

Then Laurier remarked that Marcella was of set purpose avoiding addressing him. Her criticisms, marked as her conversation so often was, by her peculiar, cultivated power to see and enjoy whatever was beautiful or grateful, were exclusively made to her mother. But she spoke only little, and Mrs. Cassilys made all the talking.

Laurier adventured a question to her. She replied at once, but it was with an evasion, whilst the lines of her proud, imperious lips signified a prohibition of all approach to her, of the hardest and most unrelenting kind.

Yet, when a moment later he remarked of the peculiar transparency in a picture that

it reminded him of a certain morning light to which she had called his attention when at Wyvenhome, she turned on him quickly and said,

‘You have not, then, quite forgotten *all*, Mr. Laurier. Surely that is a pity.’

Though Mrs. Cassilys was there he would have made her some expostulation for the tone she took with him, had not another party just then joined them, to whom Marcella turned at once to speak. It was of some riding party to Richmond Park on the following Tuesday afternoon, in which she and some of them were to be included. Then she availed herself of the opportunity to say ‘Good-bye’ to Laurier, with a formal bow. Mrs. Cassilys gave him her hand, and they parted.

Slowly Laurier went on his way.

Was it ever made plainer to any man that a woman was affronted with him?

Yet he knew he was disposed even now to stay for the chance of once more catching a glimpse of her.

And of her lips harder than steel?

No. He would go.

Of Marcella's friends one of the girls was saying to her, 'Who is that remarkably handsome man who was with you?'

'A Mr. Laurier. He is handsome, is he not? And he is this afternoon looking handsomer than I can remember ever seeing him before.' She paused a moment and went on, 'But he is not nice—no, I don't mean that exactly—well—I don't know. I suppose I should not say anything against him; he is very, very clever, and perhaps one does not easily understand such men.'

'Oh, but don't you like them?' replied her companion, a thoughtful-looking girl.

Marcella made no reply.

Meanwhile Laurier slowly strolled in the direction of the exit. His mind was very bitter, torn with chagrins, embarrassments, self-reproaches. It was not only natural, it was inevitable, it was the plain result of his own

act, that relations between himself and this accomplished girl had come to the present condition of hostilities. To *love* her he had neither right nor reason, and it was his own wrong passion—for it was wrong—that had entailed all these piques and misunderstandings. Herself blameless throughout, and scantily treated with courtesy, in return for a marked cordiality, Miss Cassilys might justly think it time to dis sever from her acquaintance a man so simply uncivil. And what would her action be if she knew him, as he had become known to himself, a man so imperfectly able to master elementary passions?

That a class of men did exist unable to command the nature of their regard for a woman he had long known, but he was abased to discover a reasonable test demonstrated him one of that company.

His self-condemnation was exaggerated no doubt, but that of hard natures mostly is so.

At the turnstile, fain to look over his shoulder for a last glimpse of Marcella, if within sight, he refused himself the indulgence, passed out, repented the self-denial, hesitated, half turned, lifted his eyes, and stopped in the middle of his movement with a shock of surprise.

In a niche close before him stood the Venus of Milo.

He had never before noticed her there. Now a thin light, which fell from some westward quarter into the shaded archway of the staircase, palely illumined the figure and face of the goddess, and, aided by the shadows of her recess, and the surprise of an unanticipated encounter, gave her some indefinite semblance of a sudden apparition.

Laurier paused regarding her.

In that faint lighting the corners of her lips caught a cold, pitiless smile, and the severe grace of her indomitable form, a strength almost formidable.

The last time he had seen her came into his memory, and strange warning words,

‘ —Beware of her. She will strike you. She will not let you go. You cannot fly from her. She will punish you, and she has an imagination, the cunning one! One cannot tell how she will take her revenge, but she will have it, and she strikes quickly, and she strikes home.’

Laurier turned and descended the stairs.

It was true. He had been very foolish to disregard the power an attractive woman wields, to presume on a strength never put to the proof. And for it he had been smitten, deeply, and hard, and soon. Aphrodite had not let him go. But neither had ‘the cunning one’ had much need of her imagination.

CHAPTER III.

Two more days, and then, at last, light.

It was not of free will that he played the poltroon. The mere consciousness of it gnawed him more even than his impossible passion. But he had been remediless. In actual life specifics reveal themselves reluctantly.

Nor is invention ruled. The idea came after all not by searching, but of itself, that is from a sphere beyond human investigation. But, which was of principal importance, it came.

It was nothing else than to acknowledge the truth to Miss Cassilys.

She was a girl with whom an explanation of the kind was possible—straightforward and

open, of a cool sense, and superior to sillinesses and unrealities. She would be capable to understand such an avowal, and to comprehend as he comprehended them, the legitimate consequences.

Afterwards there would be no more of these ridiculous misapprehensions.

And he would have raised an impassable barrier between himself and his foolish passion.

This had lain all along in his way, a simple, easy, and final remedy; only, he had not perceived it. And even now he disliked the abasement of the confession to Marcella Cassilys of a strength of mind insufficient to disentangle himself from an attachment he ought not to have formed. He saw that sink in her estimation he must. But his mind was made up. All else should be waived, and the justice respect for her and himself alike demanded be unhesitatingly done.

Some tempter suggested that a little patient delay might bring a still better course to light.

Laurier resolutely set aside the temptation to procrastinate in a matter that had gone already too far.

Whilst revolving these things he remembered Marcella's mention of the projected riding party to Richmond Park. Unless his memory misled him, it was to be on the morrow afternoon, and, as it happened that he was not presently engaged, the execution of his project need meet with no delay.

He made an early luncheon, and rode down to Richmond.

It was with a lighter heart than he had for some time borne ; with the liberated sense a man who revolts from a meanness experiences when the way to satisfy his notion of honour is discovered. It was not, though, altogether without regrets, and, more particularly, with a sore dislike to confront any presumise of the frame of mind in which he would by-and-by retrace his route, fatally lowered in Miss Cassilys's estimation, and more

or less entirely condemned to an irrevocable estrangement from her.

When he reached the park the hour was still sufficiently early to assure him the party, if they were that day coming, had not yet arrived. He made no doubt they would enter by the Robin Hood Gate, and turning his horse on the turf, slowly rode up and down, sufficiently near to descry their arrival should they come. For further precaution he had brought with him a pocket field-glass.

The afternoon was exquisite, one of those welcome mild days in February that bring a soft promise of coming warmer spring. The sky, though pale of hue, was all but cloudless, nor obscured with mist except nearer the horizon, and the sun shone with a sensible warmth, casting delicate lights on the stubby winter grass, marked with pale shadows of trees, whose boughs, bare of leaves, showed sharp against the pallid sky. In the atmosphere's clear light floated a pure and grateful freshness,

a pleasant mingling, as it seemed, of coolness and warmth, and the faintest scent of grass and trees. A considerable degree of moisture in suspense that threatened rain lent a pellucid charm to the air, and gave every view of objects far or near brilliant definition. Here and there little birds, glad of the light, twittered in the trees.

It was a very time to drink in hope, but Nature herself had yet no waking from her great sleep, except a faintly-tempered breath that moved languidly over the earth, with whispered message of the far-off coming of another summer in its rear.

‘I hope her life may be happy,’ mused Laurier; ‘at least I shall have the gratification to think I was wiser than to risk any marring of its brightness. Only when these affairs are once surmounted their meaning perishes, and the pleasure of having spared pain to the woman you might not love exists but in prospect. The days will come, soon very likely, when to me

Marcella Cassilys will be as indifferent as though we had not met, and the sense of duty towards her that now moves me will appear a mere shortsightedness of mind, when I shall have seen far beyond anything to do with her.'

In thought of such a character he spent some time surveying at frequent intervals the road on which the riders might be expected, till he began to doubt the correctness of a chance recollection.

But at length, from behind a closer clump of trees, a party of equestrians came in view, some five or six men, and as many ladies, riding in pairs and groups of four and three. He lifted his field-glass. It was they: Mrs. Cassilys among the first, and a man he had met at dinner in her house: near the middle Marcella, on a superb black horse, no doubt her pet Nabab. A man rode on either side of her, and she was engaged in animated talk. With the glass Laurier could see her face, and even catch

its expressions, as she turned whilst speaking from one to the other.

And his ears could imagine the full-toned cadence of her voice.

It wrung a wretched word from him, ' Ah, who could have thought of this ? '

At the same time the various members of the party exchanged looks, and no doubt words. The groups took other forms ; and relinquishing the road for the turf quickened their pace to a light canter. Half a minute he watched Marcella's graceful seat, and then, thrusting the field-glass into its case, started in pursuit.

Hoping for some opportunity to present himself when Miss Cassilys might be a little separated from the main body of the party, he kept at some distance, though he might easily have overtaken them. Thus they crossed the park, and he began to fear they would turn down Richmond Hill, when they all wheeled sharply to the left and proceeded in the direction of Kingston. As they went down the hill they

slackened speed, and then, passing away among the clumps of trees nearer the ponds, occasioned him some concern lest he should lose them out of sight. He therefore slightly sharpened his pace, and drew a trifle nearer.

As he did so an incident occurred exactly suited to serve his turn. An elderly man riding with two children met the party, and several, among them Marcella, reined up to exchange a few words with him. More, as the others rode on she still remained to finish what she was saying to one of the girls. Laurier quickly turned to his right, and passing on the other side of a cluster of oaks, proceeded at a walking pace in a direction that would intercept her riding to rejoin her friends.

A sound of hoofs on the turf that makes his well-mastered pulse beat faster, for, of course, it must be she.

And she has seen him, and wondered, and frowned.

Then he looks round, and reining in

his horse for her to come up with him, bows.

A salutation courteous and graceful, because she could hardly be ungraceful, but cold, and a manner with her head that shows she does not purpose that they shall speak, and she passes, at the same instant making a movement as if to urge Nabab's steps. But before that Laurier is at her side.

He said only, 'Good-afternoon, Miss Cassilys,' but there was that in the tone which discourtesy only or antipathy could disregard, and Marcella arrested the action that should have quickened the pace of her steed, and replied, not encouragingly, 'Good-afternoon, Mr. Laurier.'

Their horses were side by side. Laurier commenced without hesitation. 'I have come here this afternoon, Miss Cassilys,' he said, 'purposely with a hope of meeting you. As I have been fortunate enough to do so, I beg you will accord me a few moments.'

She regarded him interrogatively, a little

distrustfully, quite at fault to forecast what he might be about to say, and impressed with some nervousness, unlike him, in his speech. With a bow of assent she brought her horse to a stand, for a hint the colloquy should be brief.

He understood the act, and mentally winced. Her disfavour to him might be, at some future day, indifferent, but at present it smote him hard.

‘I am under your displeasure,’ he said, with more difficulty than he had anticipated. ‘Your merited displeasure, I fear. I have little hope this will ever be otherwise; still, what I have known of your character—may I say that?—’

A tiny inclination. She is watching him narrowly, and wondering what in the world is to come next.

‘—What I have known of your character has prompted me nevertheless to come here to seek you, and to dare—to tell you the truth.’

She broke in on his speech with an incisive,

‘You wish me to hear some sort of explanation.’

‘A kind of one.’

‘None is necessary, Mr. Laurier.’

Nabab pawed the ground in an impatient way, and Marcella made a movement as if she would prefer to ride on.

A dozen speeches thought of and rejected in a single moment. Then Laurier said,

‘Allow me to crave your hearing as a favour.’

She turned her proud, handsome face to his, and presented him with a sharp look of reproof.

‘A favour!’ she said. ‘Excuse me; I think, Mr. Laurier, *you* must be able to judge what claim you have to ask one; at least, *I* am not disposed to concede it. I have come, unwillingly, Mr. Laurier, much to regret that we ever met. At Wyvenhome I was pleased to make your acquaintance. Your society was a pleasure to me, and I did what lay in my

power to return the compliment of your notice with my respect and regard. I set aside entirely what I had heard of you, and judged you for myself. I was frank with you and unreserved. I shall not ask you how you have requited me. I know I am but *a woman*. I find I have made a great mistake. The acquaintance of mamma and myself is distasteful to you.'

He made a sign of protest, but she went on,

'No. I beg your pardon. You force us to think that it is so. I should not have mentioned it, though, had that been all. You are at liberty to select your friends. But, as a girl of some pride, after frankly giving you my confidence, I have felt most deeply, I am not ashamed to confess it, the alternating assumed familiarity and pointed slight it has been your pleasure to put upon me—and——'

The man could bear this no more.

'Miss Cassilys,' he exclaimed in desperation,

but still in hard, mastered tones, 'cannot you understand? I have loved you to madness, and have not known which way to turn me!'

Marcella almost jumped from her saddle.

'You—love—me!' she exclaimed, and turned to him her face, pallid with surprise, and stared at him as if his words were incomprehensible.

'I love you right dearly,' he replied, not without that trembling in his voice such words spoken in earnest can never lack. Marcella turned away her face and looked down, and he went on, 'And I am only very, very sorry that what I have done has caused you pain—Marcella.'

There was much more he would have said, but that was all superfluous now. The fateful word was spoken: for once he had called her by her Christian name: and now her reply should come next: and he steeled himself to receive it, wondering how she would word his doom.

As for Marcella, the whole scene was swimming around her, and her heart beating great thumps against her breast that made the blood sing in her ears.

Loved after all ! And the supreme moment come, with all its confusing joys, and its coy reluctance that holds back from the utterance of the word she means to say, the word that closes her girlhood's past and surrenders for ever her independence.

At last she lifted her face, all rose with blushing, and with a marvellous smile of noble lips and radiant eyes, half happy and half shy, looked into his hard, distressed, pale, handsome face, and in a moment understood he was expecting to be refused.

She held out to him her little right hand, and said,

‘But why have you almost broken my heart, Guy?’

And not a word did Laurier comprehend till his own name at the close brought the

meaning to his senses with a burst of speechless astonishment.

Accepted!

It took him some seconds to get an elementary notion of what had happened. Then he looked at Marcella, at her face coyly half averted, at her shapely form trembling with emotion, at her bent right arm, and the delicate hand that lay trustingly in his, and, for he knew not what to say to her, spoke the first word that came to his lips,

‘You mine!’

‘As you are mine.’

He lifted the hand he held, and just touched the ends of its fingers with an almost inaudible kiss.

Kissed by him! How it made her heart leap!

Her hand dropped from his, and, true woman, the first to think of *convenances*, Marcella said they should ride on. At first both were too full of thought for speech, but soon Laurier spoke of calling on Mrs. Cassilys.

‘And show mamma every respect, for my sake,’ said Marcella. ‘No one will ever know what she has been to me these last months during which you have been’—she shook her head at him with a smile—‘so cruel.’

‘I believed, Miss Cassilys——’

‘Marcella,’ she corrected.

‘Marcella, in fact I have been so perfectly convinced that you were already engaged, and that it was my duty to overcome my attachment to you——’

‘And were not able?’ she interrupted. ‘*You* not able, Guy! Oh!’ She paused for very pleasure. ‘But to whom could you imagine me to be engaged?’

‘To Charley Curteis.’

‘To Charley! Well, I dare say things do seem very like it. You must know Charley and I are more brother and sister than cousins. We are almost of the same age, and I having no brother or sister, papa not wishing me to grow up alone, got Mrs. Curteis, who has never

liked Charley, to send him, when he was three years old, to us in town. I never knew till after he went to school that he was not my brother, and to this day he has always seemed too much so for us ever to be able to fall in love, though Charley is the dearest fellow on earth—well—except——’

When they approached the brow of the rising ground, she said,

‘Come no farther now. I shall tell mamma I have seen you, and that you will call on her, when shall I say? You are busy in the day; this evening?’

He consented, and with ‘Au revoir’ she rode away, once looking round to see him still where she had left him, watching her.

So these two—neither of them perceiving it—were engaged, with little more knowledge of each other than that a three weeks’ acquaintance in a country house makes possible, and without the man having once given a thought to seeking or having a wife.

When at last Marcella was out of sight, he turned to ride slowly homewards. All had come about so abruptly and unexpectedly that he was conscious of being unprepared at every point, even with notions of his duty to the woman who had put her existence into his hands.

The unreasonableness of the last few months floated before him, now she was his, as some incredible myth. But it was impossible not to ask himself how his case would have stood had her reply been such as he had anticipated.

Respecting his happiness to have won her, it was a thing more known than felt. His love, now it was at rest, was a strong still sense with none of the rushing raptures of hers. What he most felt was a responsibility, a dear, but a gigantic one, ill understood and precipitated upon him before he had considered his own capacity to sustain it.

And the money! Mrs. Cassilys must be

well off, and her daughter was accustomed to every comfort, to something more than comfort, to a luxury which she loved. And he had but little money, no relatives, and no expectations, his profession, and that was all.

CHAPTER IV.

VERY quiet was Marcella on her ride home, a little preoccupied in her vivid joy, a trifle anxious lest any mishap should befall Laurier on his ride back to town, but tokenless of manner of the triumph she had in her heart.

But when home was reached (afternoon tea was ready in the library), she went upstairs with a face of golden smiles, and to her seat by the library fire, where, all unexpectedly, her thoughts changed to the gravest grave musing of serious things.

‘I would not sit so near the fire in that warm habit, Marcella,’ said Mrs. Cassilys as she came in.

So deep already was Marcella in her reveries that the voice made her start. She rose and

came slowly away from the fire, and sat down by the central table, leaning idly upon it, and beginning absently to stir and sip her tea, softly smiling from time to time to herself. In the centre of the table was a little vase of fresh violets, and her eyes fixed upon them with an indefinite pleasure, as though their sweetness and beauty were somehow a part of her own love. Mrs. Cassilys soon noticed her manner, and asked,

‘What amuses you so much, Marcella?’

The girl’s eyes dropped, and a tender colour mantled her cheek as she said,

‘I have seen Mr. Laurier, and he has made me a little prouder than I used to be.’

‘Oh, my dear, I’m sure there was no occasion for that,’ put in Mrs. Cassilys, with a laugh; ‘but——?’ Her eyes asked the rest.

‘He is coming this evening to call on you.’

‘Ah,’ said Mrs. Cassilys, ‘I knew how it would end. And remember, young lady, it is

all *your* fault that this did not happen at Wyvenhome. If you had given the poor man the least encouragement, you might have been engaged months ago.'

'But I should never have known what I know now,' rejoined Marcella, with an air that showed the treasured knowledge of the power her person had had over him was a secret she meant to keep to herself.

Then she came to her mother, and knelt to be kissed and congratulated, and to say, as a good girl should, some gentle words for the so much love and help she had had, and the not easy thing it would be to go away from mamma.

At dessert Mrs. Cassilys remarked, 'As you are going to be married, it may interest you to know to what your property amounts. Have you any idea?'

'I know my income is more than the trustees pay me.'

Mrs. Cassilys smiled. 'Yes, it is,' she said,

‘your whole income is a little above three thousand.’

‘Mamma!’ exclaimed the girl, ‘I thought it was about six hundred.’

‘Yes, my love, I am perfectly aware of that. Some other people think so too. I have kept these affairs, you see, to myself and my solicitor. I had not, I assure you, the least intention of seeing you wooed for your money, and I am quite satisfied that was not the bait which drew Mr. Laurier.’

‘Mamma, for shame!’ expostulated Marcella.

‘Oh, my dear, men do such things.’

But Laurier proved he merited his *fiancée’s* defence. With Mrs. Cassilys in the library he said, ‘Had I known, Mrs. Cassilys, that Miss Cassilys’s fortune was anything so considerable I must have hesitated to ask you for her hand.’

At the end of their colloquy Mrs. Cassilys said, ‘One thing, Mr. Laurier. I do not often

prose, but I must this once. Be on your guard with my girl. She loves her pleasure. I don't understand it, but her father was the same, only I assure you you have nothing to fear in that quarter. She has a generous, high-spirited nature, and her pride is a great safeguard. But her pride,—don't be deceived, her pride is very great, and her sensitiveness equals it. Be just to her, and speak her the truth. She is not intractable, and will readily listen to reason, and you will never regret to have shown her very great consideration. But, respect her sensitiveness, Mr. Laurier. She has given her whole soul and being to you, and a wrong done her by you, perhaps even a little one, will be a blow her nature will not know how to sustain: and when she is roused there is something of the rebel in her, for which I fear, and for which her father feared.'

Many a man would have protested the impossibility of so great inconsiderateness. Laurier only stood thinking awhile: after

which he said, 'Thanks, very many thanks. I will remember.'

They proceeded to the drawing-room, where Marcella, deliciously impatient, awaited them.

She had never looked lovelier. A brightness shone in her eyes, a beauty graced her lips, and the fine lines of her thoughtful face, so proud and tender at once as never before. A long-trained evening dress of *écru* Indian muslin with profuse blendings of Languedoc lace, with one crimson cluster of Pierre Durand roses nestling on her bosom, lent her delicate colour and statuesque form all the heightening graceful costume has power to give, whilst the beauty of her carriage and pose was the movement and rest of a girl with happiness pulsing in every vein.

For Laurier there was a long pressure of her hand with a look of the dearest welcome steadfast eyes can give.

They had not had time to sit down before

Mrs. Cassilys found she had forgotten something upstairs, and left them.

‘I have brought you a little present,’ said Laurier, taking immediate advantage of the opportunity to offer her an engaged ring.

She drew nearer, laying her right hand on his arm.

‘It is a little token of more than my love,’ he said, ‘it represents the exact number of guineas I had for my best brief. So you must think that you wear the best fortune I have had.’

‘Oh, Guy, this is being loved,’ murmured the girl.

She gave him her left hand and he slipped the little jewel on her finger. The brief must have been well paid. He let her have time to satisfy her eyes with the ring, and then he said,

‘Love, you will give me a kiss?’

She turned her face away with a blush, hanging her head, and lifting to her hot cheek her newly-ringed hand, as the other fell from

his arm. An instant he looked with a smile in her face, and then, putting his hand to her waist would have drawn her to him to steal the kiss, but quicker than he, she put back her hand and gently thrust his away.

‘Oh! one moment, Guy—please.’

But within a minute the same hand that had repelled him was shyly held out for him to take, and slowly turning round to be drawn to him, she lay her other hand on his shoulder, and raised her face, just tender with roses.

Not one, but two of the proudest kisses of fearless love, woman’s lips could take and give.

Many days and weeks with a slow flow of a soft changing happiness.

Strangely little came to break the even course of this love. Sometimes Mrs. Cassilys wondered at it, and asked herself whether a passion so calm was indeed that which could satisfy her daughter’s vigorous, sensitive being. But, she only wondered, and said nothing.

By gentle degrees Marcella's character unveiled itself in its truth to her lover.

A character much more simple than he had supposed, with a certain reserve of power, otherwise, rather matter-of-fact, pleasure-loving, and utterly honest and unselfish.

Her pride, in spite of Mrs. Cassilys's assertions, impressed him little. He could see she was proud, but with him she showed herself docile and yielding to a fault, apparently regarding him as a superior intelligence, of a category different from her own, with a satisfaction that proved embarrassing. But her opinion of pleasure was a thing that dumbfounded him.

No one had seen it as she let him see it, plainly without reserve—a nothing less than voluptuousness systematised.

In a strong sensitive nature, the luxurious germs her father had taken infinite care to implant had made themselves masters of all. No mere gay nonsense, no frolic of the feminine love of perversity amused to essay a

jeu-d'esprit, was Marcella's opinion that pleasure was good, but her solid conviction, the daily bread of her thought, the ground of her truth, the knowledge that persuaded her wish to be generous, just, and brave.

Of a cast of mind essentially different, educated before all things to endure hardness, and stern of view to a fault, Laurier was compelled to see in her way of thinking the most bizarre inversion of all the fundamental truths of life that was ever invented, and especially when denying all weight to his arguments, and assuming for axiomatic all he was disinclined to allow to be true, she arrived at the same ultimate practical conclusions as himself.

Still, though her manner of thinking awakened in him some grave apprehensions, when he asked himself what his course with it should be, he preferred, even in the light of his responsibility for her happiness, to leave her thought alone. Her life as it was was solid and true, and he dared not take from her what,

he could see, was the breath of her intellectual being.

Beyond that the many-sidedness of her life struck him—she appeared herself unconscious of the phenomenon, and a punctilious occupation of every hour of her time, that drew a remark from him.

‘I had always been led to suppose, Marcella, that to find employment for the spare time of young ladies was one of the great difficulties of life.’

‘Ah, don’t you believe it, Guy,’ she answered, laughing; ‘a girl who means to be a healthy, happy woman has more to do than she knows how to find time for.’

As for the outside world, the little excitement that the announcement of the engagement produced soon passed. At the end of six days Marcella’s friends had ceased to discuss her expected, unexpected, extraordinary, charming, disappointing, providential, foolish, scandalous, inexplicable betrothal. Accident,

or management, kept the news from Wyvenhome. Florelle had previously returned home, and to a subsequent suggestion of Marcella's that she should be invited to town after Easter, Mrs. Cassilys replied with a quiet 'No, my dear.' The same person informed Charley, and added, 'Hold your tongue. Marcella thinks I have written about her engagement to Wyvenhome, and that your mother does not like it. So she says nothing about it in her letters. You know your mother is a strange woman in some things.—Well, you understand.' To which Charley replied that he did understand, which was not true, and, this was the principal thing, held his peace. So the people at Wyvenhome heard nothing of what had occurred.

Laurier himself told Keppel.

'There are ugly reports about her conduct last year at Folkestone,' remarked the latter between two puffs of a cigar.

It was all he said on the subject. Laurier

could have been angry, but he knew it was impossible to Keppel to speak of women as anything more than a kind of commodity, and, having himself once had a very similar opinion, forgave it. When he was gone, Keppel said to himself, 'Tut, another good fellow in a mess for life with a petticoat. I guessed the end when he would not listen to me.'

The short Easter vacation arrived, and Mrs. Cassilys persuaded Laurier to spend it in the country with herself and Marcella. She had a friend's house in Buckinghamshire lent her for three weeks, and a merry time they had there. It was the end of March, and beautiful weather. On every hand the country sides were filled with the advent of life, and already in the woods the anemones and primroses and daffodils, and in the gardens the hyacinths and pansies, and, where they were sheltered, the early china roses, were gladdening the earth with flowers. Where life is waxing there works

a spell which nothing that lives can resist, and together in the fresh, taintless air Marcella and Laurier found their young lives fill with a species of inexhaustible happiness—happiness of what golden hours, what walks, what pleasant rides, what strolls in the garden, what evenings by the fire, what privilege to be under one roof, what foreshadowing of that time when one common life should belong to both !

There it was, in the simple circumstances of their daily life, that Laurier discovered in his lady-love's nature a thing till then unknown—that responsive soul which had won Lady Julia to her. There it was that on the river one sunny afternoon he lay at her feet, at the bottom of the boat, with his head against her knees, under the shadow of her sunshade, whilst neither spoke, and the moving hours stole away unapprehended, their two lives steeped in a measureless timeless calm, like a touch of the lull of eternity. There it was that he first spoke of a date that should be some

day fixed as if he wished it near, and she replied, closing his hands between her palms with a seeming of supplication, ‘Not yet, Guy, please, these are such golden days.’

From Buckinghamshire (Laurier had gone back to town) Marcella went again to visit Lady Julia, and the lovers had opportunity to study each others characters in their letters—a great opportunity if young people only understood how to use it.

Lady Julia spoke seldom to Marcella of her engagement, but kindly, and almost always with some admonition. Thus, one evening whilst the chess-men were being set, she said, with an air of having considered the subject,

‘I hear much praise of the man you have accepted for your husband, my dear. It is a pity he has not more money, but I suppose his being a professional man is a kind of rank that balances your relative positions.’—Lady Julia had not yet learned to avoid speeches of this sort.—‘But, unless I am mistaken, his is a

temperament very unlike your own, and you must be on your guard that you do not misjudge him, and be content to love him in your way, and in return to be loved in his way, don't try——' the old lady bit her lip.

'I know, Lady Julia, what you mean,' said the girl prompt to spare her the pain of some words and thoughts, 'and many thanks for your warning.'

The evening before she left Lady Julia spoke to her seriously, and, as she at first thought, strangely, on a far different topic. She had asked of Mrs. Curteis's opinions respecting her niece's engagement; no doubt purposing to lead up to her subject, for Lady Julia's circumlocutory courtesies were only for persons of a certain rank. Marcella replied, as she believed to be true, that her mother had at the time written to Mrs. Curteis, and that the latter had been not quite pleasant about the affair, in consequence of which it was tabooed between them.

‘Has it ever occurred to you,’ asked Lady Julia, ‘to suspect your aunt of being in a very serious way your enemy?’

‘I am no favourite with aunty,’ replied Marcella, with a little smile of amusement; ‘but I don’t think—well, Lady Julia, aunty has shown me many little kindnesses in her own way, and——’

‘My dear, I neither know your aunt nor wish to know her,’ interrupted Lady Julia. ‘The Curteises are nobodies, and they always make *mésalliances*; but is it not a fact that if anything were to happen to you she would have your money unless you marry, and is it not in consequence her interest that you should not marry?’

‘Well, yes,’ replied Marcella, a little surprised by Lady Julia’s intimate knowledge of her affairs, ‘and I know mamma thinks some odd things on that score, and aunty is a little selfish. Still——’

The girl was evidently loth to believe evil.

‘ You once went with her to Folkestone ; what happened there ? I heard something about it, more especially concerning a ball at a house to which, I should say, you ought not to have gone.’

‘ Lady Julia, the truth about that is, that I was a little—no, I fear not a little—thoughtless,’ answered Marcella. And she added a pretty general confession, taking entirely on herself the blame of what had occurred.

The old lady interrupted her. ‘ It is useless to pretend, my dear, that this was all your own action. You were pushed into it. I repeat it, pushed into it. You know Mr. Keppel is an old friend of mine. Just trouble yourself to read a letter of his.’

She fetched a letter from her desk, and put it into Marcella’s hands. It was that letter Keppel had written from Folkestone the morning after the ball. The subject-matter was twofold ; Keppel’s impression of herself, an impertinent but not an unfair one ; and the

compromising rumours her aunt was cautiously, for fear of entangling herself, but more or less successfully, labouring to disseminate concerning her.

A cloud of anger gathered over Marcella's face, and before the letter was half perused she laid it down, and said, with indignation, 'Lady Julia, what is here said to have been said of me is disgracefully untrue.'

'Doubtlessly. But it is what your aunt attempted to get believed. Read to the end.'

At the end were half a dozen sentences in which Keppel very justly judged the character of her behaviour with Rintearn. Marcella folded the letter and returned it.

'No. You had better keep it, Marcella,' said Lady Julia; 'it is of no service to me. If you will take the advice of an old woman, let Mr. Laurier see it. Shall you dare?'

'He shall certainly see it,' answered Marcella, in a tone that showed it was as to her champion that the letter would be shown to

him. Then she added, ‘I perhaps have not been just of thought to Mr. Keppel—and yet, I do not like him.’

‘I have found him worthy of every confidence,’ observed Lady Julia, ‘and number him among the foremost of my friends. But it does not follow he would prove the same to you—there are, you see, some differences.’

CHAPTER V.

THE Strynes came to town, and after them Mr. Hammerbratsch in pursuit of Theo.

She still held him at bay, but it became increasingly difficult; and, even so, little concessions that were 'quite too awful' had to be made to keep papa and mamma quiet. In fact, Theo's defences were invested on every side, and an epoch was close at hand when only the consciousness she dared not could retain her from accepting him.

'I know what you will say, Charley,' she remarked (it was at a dinner at Mrs. Cassilys's), 'a girl oughtn't, and one should have more pluck, and all that. But you don't know, Charley, what a ghastly time a girl has with her parents about the man they want her to marry.'

‘Well,’ replied Charley, ‘you know all you have to do is to come to Saint ——’s any day you like to name.’

Yes, Theo knew that, but she was also conscious of a very natural hesitancy about going to Saint ——’s.

But Hammerbratsch became ‘quite utterly unmanageable,’ and papa and mamma ‘nagged so,’ and in consequence, when just in the nick of time a certain great aunt of hers came to town, Theo’s determination was taken.

For this great aunt’s ideas of town were of the confused kind. To her London was a boundless labyrinth of undistinguishable streets, whose names and directions she could not remember. Where she was in this labyrinth, and which was the way to any other part of it, were questions she relegated to the category of unknowables. Even when under the guidance of an experienced Londoner she could not refrain from frequent repetitions of the question, ‘Are you quite sure we have not lost the

way?’ Mrs. Stryne disliked to go about with this good soul; and, as she was fond of Theo, no more simple arrangement could be than that they should go out together, aunt as chaperone, and niece as guide.

With a duenna of this description twenty minutes’ visit to a church was the most feasible of enterprises. Under the impression that she was in some fashionable shop, aunty was lodged before the counter of a showy suburban haberdasher, and Theo, ostensibly simultaneously engaged in another department of the same establishment—that was to save time—was quickly as imagination out of the shop, around the corner, half-way down a side street, and, with her heart beating ninety strokes a minute, at the door of Saint ——’s.

In the shabby porch she paused, more than half disposed to go back. She looked to the right and left to see if any person was watching, and then with a sudden resolve, ran across the length of the porch and into the church.

Inside the first thing she saw was Mrs. Cassilys.

When Charley at first begged it, Mrs. Cassilys flatly refused to come. Charley exerted his best powers of persuasion, but she remained obdurate to the end, though he urged some things most pathetically true concerning his brave, dashing Theo, her abjuration of presents, and bridesmaids, and wedding breakfast, and cake, and diamonds; and her merit of better things than to be married with only the sexton and his wife for witnesses, and to be given away by a pew-opener, with many more such things beside.

Mrs. Cassilys would have simply nothing to do with it.

However, when he was gone, and she began to think that Theo and he would be married whether herself were present or not, and of how confused and deserted poor, lonely Theo would be—there she was only partially right, Theo was never confused—and that, after all,

if the young people's parents were angry, that would not matter a straw to her; when she began to think of all this, she shortly changed her mind, relented, and went.

Now she caught both Theo's hands and gave them a hearty squeeze, simultaneous with a kiss on her cheek, and then asked, a trifle ominously,

‘Dear, I hope you have seriously thought of what you are going to do?’

‘Oh, Mrs. Cassilys,’ exclaimed Theo, ‘please don't ask me to think any more, or I shall never make up my mind at all. How awfully kind this is of you to have come. I am so glad. Is everything ready, for I have not a minute to spare?’

Everything was ready, and a bouquet, and a veil, and orange blossoms, and a pair of diamond earrings, Mrs. Cassilys's present, and a little ivory and silver prayer-book, which Theo held upside down till the middle of the ceremony, when she discovered her mistake

and so suddenly inverted her book, that Charley almost burst into a laugh. Theo had managed to come in a white silk tucked up under her mantle. It was new, and its acquisition had cost some dreadful fibs.

Then in a moment the mantle was off, and the pretty white silk smoothed down, and her hat removed, and her earrings changed, and the veil on, and the orange blossoms over it, and her bouquet in her hands, and she at the altar steps, and the ceremony begun, and the ring on her finger, and everything over, and Theo changed into Mrs. Curteis, before she had had time to take in anything except that her prayer-book had been upside down.

In the vestry Mrs. Cassilys insisted on her having a copy of the register, and told her to take good care of it. Theo's bridal apparel vanished even to her ring, and then Mrs. Cassilys said, 'I have a nice little breakfast for you at Kensington, can you manage to come?'

Theo managed, and unsuspecting aunty went home to Mrs. Stryne with a message that Theo had met Mrs. Cassilys and gone to luncheon with her.

So, after all, Theo had her wedding cake, and champagne, and though the party were only three—Marcella being at Sritten Court—they were a very happy party, and had no wedding speeches. Only poor Theo found it hard, after having put a tiny bit of her cake through her ring for Marcella, to have to put the ring away, and to say ‘Good-bye’ to her husband. Her long slender fingers nestled long in his hand, as she said, ‘Think of me as you have always thought of me, Charley, and I will not disappoint you.’

After which Mrs. Cassilys drove with her back to her parents.

Theo went to a ball, to which she had been invited, that same evening, with a peculiar, unfamiliar sense of being somebody who she was not, a bizarre consciousness of an event of

which she had the complete physical and no moral assurance. To be called Miss Stryne fell with a little jar on her ears, and it was a singular experience to feel among the girls that she was no longer really one of them, and to regard the married women with a knowledge she had entered their order. Still she spent a delightful evening, and at a stroke demolished Mr. Hammerbratsch's operations of the last three months with an inventiveness of sudden resource that astonished herself.

CHAPTER VI.

THE weeks sped on.—It was the height of the season: the parks and the great world were in their glory. Marcella had returned to town, and a good deal of gaiety was going on at Mrs. Cassilys's.—Then it was the beginning of June: and London began to grow hot, and Mrs. Curteis, to Mrs. Cassilys's secret relief, had finally relinquished her project, postponed from week to week, of coming up with Florelle for a part of the season; asserting for reason that Flo had better wait another year, she was so childish; having for cause a large sum of money disbursed in one of those entirely useless expenditures Mr. Curteis from time to time made in behalf of his conscienceless son abroad.—Then it was the middle of June, and there

was a fluttering among the birds of passage in silk and gold, and Laurier's visits to Kensington became week by week more rare, as with the advancement of the sittings his work grew heavier.

‘Never were engaged people less engaged than my daughter and her sweetheart,’ observed Mrs. Cassilys, and with truth. Never did man and maiden make less demonstrative love. If they met it was more like friends than *fiancés*; if not, they did without seeing each other, without either mopishness or suspicions. They would talk together, when they got the chance, for hours, it was true, but that was of subjects of common interest, and in such a manner that absolute strangers might have listened without the faintest impertinence. Tender secrets and nervous little misunderstandings apparently did not come within their range of thought. Marvellously little in the way of *yeux doux*, and of sitting close side by side, and of dalliance of affectionate hands,

passed between them, and kisses were the events of twice or thrice in a fortnight, mostly exchanged when there was time for nothing else, when Marcella had run in for a moment to Laurier's chambers, or a casual meeting chanced to afford them opportunity for a hurried touch of each others' lips, in lieu of a mere pressure of hands, and a look in each others' honest eyes.

But the love between the two grew strong for all its quietness. This still fondness that lurks out of common sight, a matter of thoughts, of little generous forbearances, and quiet intense regard, is a puissant thing; and has before now bound a man and a woman to each other in the most powerful of passions—the love that permits itself to love, more than it permits itself to show, the hunger and thirst of soul for soul after they have fallen in love with thoughts and characteristics.

There existed already indications of something of that kind. An unfailing pleasure

(cheerfully foregone when necessary) that the two had to be anywhere together, and for any length of time : an inexhaustible interest of meaning which the life of each had for the other : the unqualified liberty the man allowed his betrothed : and the ability she had to take her many pleasures as though they were somehow by reflection enjoyed by him.

She still made him wonder at her ways ; and more and more now at her way with himself ; at her manner, proud in its tenderness ; at her talk, more hesitating, more reflective, when addressed to him, and yet brighter, with an *espièglerie* even beyond its wont ; at the respectful, attentive look in her eyes, that told, how with all her charming tyrannies, and from time to time she would have them, her love in its strength and beauty only waited on him.

Yet at this very time he wounded her.

It was done in a trice, by a simple word, regarding a trivial circumstance, an act of mere inadvertence. Only that inadvertence was the

very thing which made for her its insupportableness.

This happened one Sunday afternoon. He had had luncheon at Kensington, and since they had been talking together in the library, a room always cool, seated in a shaded corner of the study.

‘By the way,’ remarked Laurier in the course of their conversation, ‘are you aware that you made a very strong impression at Mrs. Purraid’s on Wednesday last?’

‘On a Mr. Borthwin. Well—I thought so.’

‘I met him yesterday afternoon, and, really, he spoke in terms so flattering of one Miss Cassilys, that I felt all but inclined to hint something regarding my own relations to the young lady. But I held my tongue. Probably your imagination can suggest the sort of thing said.’

‘Yes, I think I could conjecture,’ answered Marcella smiling.

‘I see this is scarcely news.’

‘I think I know when I have made a favourable impression. I have had my share of experience in that way, and, after all, that is not a thing difficult to recognise.’

‘Perhaps, too, I was not wrong when I conjectured Mr. Borthwin had left little room for misapprehension.’

‘No,’ she spoke slowly and with a smile, ‘he was distinctly complimentary: in a nice way too, one pleasant to hear, and pleasant to remember’—the last phrase was more seriously said than what preceded—‘I shall be glad to meet him again.’

‘You admit admiration among the legitimate sources of pleasure then, Marcella?’

‘I admit no illegitimate sources of real pleasure. We discussed that last week. Yes, I like some admiration; the admiration of quiet approval, I like very much. I fancy most people do. I am perhaps a little exceptional in confessing it. I suppose,’ she regarded him mischievously, ‘though I know

you are sometimes very rude, you are scarcely going to tell me there is nothing in myself to admire, Sir Impudence?’

‘No.’

‘No,’—imitating his voice, ‘confess at once, sir, that you consider your *fiancée* among the *élite* of her sex.’

‘Confessed: and in more earnest than you spoke it. I have no wish to dispute the accuracy of Borthwin’s judgment respecting “the handsomest, best informed, wittiest, most graceful, most agreeable woman in the room. I think that is about it.’

‘Well,’ said Marcella slowly, ‘I was so this time, saving perhaps the “agreeable,” about which I cannot say. I am often the best informed, I am not often the handsomest woman at a large evening party, but on this occasion I was.’

‘And not averse from hearing it?’

‘Why should I be, seeing it is true and pleasant?’

Laurier leaned back in his corner of the settee. 'Yet I cannot help thinking there are some other aspects of the question,' he said in a tone of amusement.

'Which?'

'Say Mr. Borthwin's, perhaps.'

'Mr. Borthwin's, perhaps? Does that mean perhaps *not* Mr. Borthwin's but somebody's else?' supplied Marcella's rapid intellect instantaneously. She laid her hand on the seat, and bending over towards Laurier asked, 'Guy, *you* are not displeased about anything? About my having gone when you could not, or——'

'Displeased at nothing, Marcella. Be sure of that. Were I, I should tell you of it straightforwardly and at once.' (Marcella resumed her former position satisfied.) 'I was only interested in a phenomenon. I suppose that for you handsome women to intoxicate a man, being so easy a thing as it is, it is but natural you should from time to time amuse

yourselves with the agreeable emotions of a conquest.'

Marcella turned half round and regarded him with a surprise in her face such as it might have worn had a thunderbolt fallen at her feet.

'You seem surprised. Is it not so?' asked Laurier smiling.

'That I am one of those girls who go about trying to make men fall in love with them?'

'In the common, pronounced way, no, my dear. There is an art above artfulness. Still one who finds pleasure in being admired, presuming, I cannot but think, a certain degree of tenderness in the admiration that comes from the opposite sex. Eh, dear?'

There was a degree of earnestness in his words, but the earnestness of good-natured jest only. Marcella had sunk back in her seat, and the lids fell low over her eyes. It was half a minute before she spoke, very deliberately.

'I am susceptible of the pleasure of admiration, if you please : and I *have* flirted in play ;

yes, and in earnest too; with an earnestness that might have led to more serious feelings, had I not found the men I met—excepting you—so far from being the characters to whom I could wish to surrender my freedom. But, Guy—do you see what you are saying, that you think me a woman who wishes and manœuvres to make the men she meets fall in love with her?’

‘Most women do, do they not?’ suggested Laurier, a trifle surprised, but still smiling.

‘And I like the rest. I see. And you have thought that, and not thought me worth a reproof?’

‘Reproof! my dear Marcella, the weakness seems to me merely very natural.’

A great shadow came over Marcella’s face. ‘Does it?’ she said bitterly. Then she rose and walked away towards the window. Before half the distance was traversed she turned.

‘Guy,’ she began, and bit her lip before she continued, ‘you have judged me *simply contemptible*. If you are going to think so of

me, we may be very fond of each other, but, it will be for our happiness to part.'

'Marcella!' he exclaimed, rising to approach her. But her gesture forbade it. Slowly she turned away, and walking to the window-seat sank down upon it, in the attitude of a woman at bay, angrily scanning him from the corners of her eyes.

Little by little Laurier began to come to some understanding, amidst floating recollections of Mrs. Cassilys's warnings, and distinct misgivings concerning the scene Marcella was being pleased to make. Counting it, however, in any case his part, as of the stronger sex, to be the first to offer conciliation, he approached, her eyes watching him as he came near where she sat, and asked gently,

'Will you hear what I have to say, dear?'

She bowed her head slightly.

He sat down beside her, and said, respectfully, but with a kind of authority, 'Marcella—think—I do not know why you are angry.'

Whilst he spoke he drew her hand into his.

‘I am not angry: only sorry, bitterly sorry. Oh, and a little angry too, perhaps. Give me my hand, please.’ (He reluctantly let her withdraw it.) ‘Why should you attribute, as a matter of course to me, a trait which in one of your own sex you would account worse than contemptible? For you did not speak in jest.’

Laurier folded his arms and looked down. She was perfectly right. In one of his own sex he would have thought the trait contemptible, yet not in her. For what reason?

Then he lifted his eyes, and said, ‘Marcella, I have been unjust. I beg your pardon.’

‘You men love what is vile,’ answered the girl, restlessly, ‘I have seen it again and again. But I thought you different. Now you begin to seem as easy to content as the rest.’

‘I hope not, Marcella.’

‘And *I* hope not.’ A full minute elapsed before she went on. ‘There is my forgiveness,

Guy'—she put her hand very lovingly into his —‘I do not easily forgive. Things such as you have said rankle deep in me and make me mad. But, Guy—my love’—she drew close to him,—‘how could *you* stoop to care for me if you thought me so empty of understanding as that. And—my own—you do very wrong, if you see me behave unworthily, and only smile. If you let me one day wake up to know that you have found me base and judged me not worth correction, that day I shall do mad things, Guy; and the fault will not be all my own. But, now, do not think I distrust you.’

She lifted her lips to his, but it was evident that she was fighting a hard battle with herself, and with her wounded pride, and the rankling recollection of what he had been able to think of her. For nearly a week her manner betrayed a spice of disquiet, like the aching of a wound that had healed, or the recollection of a blow forgiven but not understood. It was difficult for her to comprehend how his long

habitual distrust of her sex should relate to her even by accident.

But after the soreness was passed the two drew closer to each other than before.

In fact the postponement of their marriage began to seem to Mrs. Cassilys a mistake, and, before long, revealed itself, as only a postponement of happiness, to themselves.

It was an evening early in July. They had been for a long ride in the country with a party of five or six others, but riding together had somehow got in advance.

Arrived at the top of a long hill they became aware that the rest were more than half a mile in the rear. The road, passing through a private estate at this point, entered with a sharp curve the long perspective of an avenue of elms, along the level crown of the hill. They turned their horses on the turf which bordered the road on either side, and proceeded at a slack walk for the others to overtake them.

The summer evening was of the loveliest. The setting sun, sinking fast in their rear, cast before them long shadows on the glittering grass, and filled the long perspective of trees with level, tempered lights, that shone soft, and changeful on the domes and bosses of luxuriant leafage. A sense of cooling reigned in the quiet air. In the sky of insensibly deepening blue the torn lines of stratus began to catch the reflected rose and crocus of the sunset, whilst approaching the horizon the azure of the zenith faded to a pallid band of pearly grey, changed to a thin bottle-green as it neared the West, to be in turn lost, by slow gradations, in the flames of crimson and blaze of gold where the sun was going down. At intervals the evening breeze began to stir, and whispering with gentle motion among the millions of leaves shook out into the air the freshness of their scents. Each moment the twitterings of birds became more numerous. On the turf the tread of the horses fell muffled

and soft, and from somewhere, not within sight, came the melodious, slow sounds of a village curfew tolling out—as for half a thousand years—the knell of another day.

The two had fallen silent. Slowly their beasts drew nearer together, so near that Laurier's leg touched the flank of Nabab. Gently he leaned over towards Marcella, passing his arm about her waist, as she with a similar movement leaned towards him, and lay down her head on his shoulder, as she suffered a part of her weight to rest on his arm. Turning his head he brought down his lips on the lips that moved to meet them and kissed her in a long soundless kiss, whilst the horses paced on side by side, with their bridles loose on their necks, and their beautiful heads together as if the same spell that held their riders moved them too to fondle each other.

Then Marcella said, 'Oh, Guy, we shall be seen,' and drew herself unwillingly from his arms.

They proceeded a few yards in silence. Then Laurier said,

‘Love, let us get married. It is time we had one home, and one life. We are only throwing away happiness and each other’s society.’

It was a little time before Marcella replied, but her reply was an assent. In a week or two her mother and herself were going abroad for a few weeks. The sittings commenced in November, and so the marriage was fixed for September, leaving them more than a clear month for the honeymoon.

Mrs. Cassilys was informed the same evening.

‘I am glad of it, Marcella,’ she said, ‘and now, would you and Mr. Laurier like to have this house?’

‘But where are you going to live, mamma?’

‘My dear, I am going to America to see my brothers. I shall start on the day after

your wedding, and probably I shall not be in England again for a couple of years. Once in the States, I mean to make a long stay and to see everything.'

Marcella looked thoughtful. Her mother gently laid her hand on her shoulder and said,

'My love, what does that look mean? That you have not yet found out how to do without mamma? That is not what some one has a right to expect, Marcella. It is to his counsel, and his help, and his love that you must learn to look for everything. You are going to be his *wife*, you know—more than his love.'

'Perhaps, mamma, you are right,' replied the girl, reluctantly. 'I should hardly learn to do without you whilst you were near. Only it does seem a little like breaking ties I hoped would never break.'

'What! your mother's apron-strings, little goosey? Do you suppose I am going to love you one atom less for being a married woman,

and having taken up your independence? Only you must learn to take it up, Marcella.'

Returning, however, to the question of residence, Marcella preferred to have a new home for her own. She liked to turn over a page for the beginning of a new chapter, and, perhaps, was not wrong. A pleasant Queen Anne's house, with a better garden than ordinary, was chosen in West Kensington, and arrangements made for the new laying out of the grounds, and the enlargement of one of the rooms on the ground floor to contain the library, to be completed by the time of her return with her mother from abroad. Then Marcella promised herself to create a small heaven on earth, already sketched in imaginations of a ravishing drawing-room, of a dining-room furnished in old oak, correspondingly quiet, of cool wholesome bedrooms, of a library in the style of the Italian renaissance—that extravagance was a present from Mrs. Cassilys, who had given her

daughter *carte blanche* at De Marnhyac's—and of a garden as artfully pretty as magic could make, or, what is better than magic, the taste and thought of a woman.

Florelle was to go abroad with them, and before starting Mrs. Cassilys went down for a few days to Wyvenhome. Mrs. Curteis's curiosity concerning what had been happening all the long time since she had last seen Marcella was evident and considerable; the more because a certain reticence, discovered alike in Mrs. Cassilys's and her son's letters, suggested an anticipation of something amiss. But to extract information from Mrs. Cassilys was difficult, and instead of learning anything Mrs. Curteis only amused her sister-in-law with her naïve inquiries, made in happy ignorance of Marcella's engagement and approaching marriage.

So came the day before Mrs. Cassilys left.

In the evening Mrs. Curteis pressed to be

allowed a little more of her niece's society, and begged that Mrs. Cassilys would allow Marcella to spend some weeks with her, as last year, at the seaside.

‘I fear she will not have time,’ replied Mrs. Cassilys. She proceeded to mention visits she had promised to pay, and places to which she desired to go, and concluded, ‘If we are to be at home before the end of August, we have not a day to spare.’

‘But why must you be at home by the end of August?’

Mrs. Cassilys languidly put herself into the position in which she could best watch her hostess's face, and replied, as if referring to some unimportant matter,

‘I could not disappoint my young people.’

‘Marcella and Flo? If Flo has said anything to you, you must not think she cares. Her head is always full of fancies. If she has been suggesting anything to you about wanting to return here in August I am sorry

you did not mention it to me. I would have given her a good scolding.'

'Flo is a good girl,' observed Mrs. Cassilys.

'But what has she been saying?'

'Nothing to me.'

'What do you mean then, when you speak about disappointing the young people?'

'Oh,' said Mrs. Cassilys, as if some forgotten subject had been recalled to her memory, 'I meant Marcella and Mr. Laurier. Don't you remember my writing to tell you they were going to be married in September?'

How should she remember it, when no such thing had ever been written?

'Married! Your daughter married!' exclaimed Mrs. Curteis, dropping the crochet she had in her hands, and bending forward as her hands closed tightly with excitement.

'Oh yes,' returned Mrs. Cassilys, looking up with faultlessly feigned surprise, 'she is going to marry Mr. Laurier, the barrister, whom she met here last autumn, Charley's friend. Don't

you remember him? They are to be married in September. Did I not write to you all about it? I so often forget to write about things.'

That was true. But to say so much was a mistake. It gave Mrs. Curteis time to arrest an explosion of indignation which would have been a betrayal of all her behaviour. Now she only said,

'You astonish me! Mr. Laurier, dear me!'

'Yes,' thought Mrs. Cassilys, 'I imagined you would be astonished.'

'Defeat!' mused Mrs. Cassilys that night. 'Well, I did my best.'

Yes, she had done all she dared. She had not liked to go further. She was a stern woman, even in her malice, and her 'conscience' had held her back from action more criminal or more overt.

But with consideration, hope revived. After all, if Marcella were married, marriage was

not in life, as in fiction, any shelter from the vicissitudes of time and chance, only a very commonplace occurrence: and before that marriage there were yet two months.

A vain hope; the two months slipped away quite unproductive of opportunity.

Then the wedding day was fixed, and bridesmaids selected, dresses ordered, and invitations issued. The furnishing of the new house at Kensington was finished. Marcella and Laurier had had read to them, and had signed what appeared to the former volumes of legal documents, representing, her mother assured her, the most unexceptional behaviour on the part of her betrothed. No accident intervened in favour of Mrs. Curteis.

So an evening arrived of infinite bustle, on which Laurier paid a hurried visit to Mrs. Cassilys's house, and saw Marcella for a few minutes in the back drawing-room. Mrs. Cassilys hated pets of every kind, and so hitherto, with the exception of making a pet

of Nabab, Marcella had denied herself the pleasure of possessing them. Now Laurier had with him, besides other things, a mastiff—a magnificent thoroughbred, just emerging from his puppyhood—which he made to come to Marcella and obey her, and lie down at her feet, and comprehend that this new lady was to be for the future his divinity and the mistress of his life. Then with a kiss and ‘A demain,’ he left.

That same evening it befel that Mrs. Curteis, come to town for the wedding, met Keppel.

‘So your niece is going to be married, after all,’ he said.

‘Not too soon,’ replied Mrs. Curteis, with a smile of malice. ‘By the way, you know Mr. Laurier. Have you any idea what they have given him to take her?’

‘No; is that so, though? But then, it is not true that your daughter is one of the bridesmaids?’

‘I could not help it,’ stammered Mrs. Curteis.

This evening there was a suffocating oppression at her heart that surprised herself.

It was the baffled hatred of her niece.

She had believed she had merely had interests, merely schemed for her own, and for her right to that fortune of acquiring which some vague sort of hope clung to her still. But emotions are stronger than the interests that breed them, and the last two months had had effects.

She did not yet know it, but, as a fact, she bore the girl a vivid, living hate.

Hatred is more vital than love. Both live on themselves, and love’s being is of the elementary forces that occasion life, but, like them, it spends itself on its being. Hate spends not. Like death, a negation, unreal, proportionless,; it only consumes, and consumes insatiate—men, and women, and things, and happiness, and wealth, and beauty, and life.

A morrow, with pale sunshine and bright smiles, and many flowers. A bevy of maidens in turquoise silk, amongst them golden Flo, first bridesmaid, so divinely lovely that people in the church ask where the bridegroom's eyes were when he chose her cousin. To which it is replied, 'On the money-bags.' A bride in her diamonds, a little pale, as brides will be, and not looking her best. Events that pass in a whirl so swift that warm hearts have barely time for the things they would fain be thinking. A long, long kiss from Mrs. Cassilys, to-day looking her very handsomest, to a tall girl in her travelling costume, and Mrs. Laurier has driven away with her husband.

CHAPTER VII.

MARRIAGE makes a woman or mars her.

It is a strange *bouleversement* when a girl first finds herself in its new circumstances. So many things altered, half her habits of existence inverted, most of her ways and all her maiden habitudes become in a breath impossible for ever, about her conditions and things new and ill understood, bursts of new aspects, vanishings of partial views, and she suddenly dragged into the midst of all these things, wishful to be a good girl in a way quite different from what before was good—if she can.

There is scarcely any period in a woman's existence at which she has greater need of help; and the need is greatest with some of the best of them, those the very strength and fineness

of whose training makes them at once the more sensitive, and conscious and conscientious. Yet how many, or how few rather, are the men who think at all of the moral needs of brides who lay maiden hands in theirs?

It *may* be questioned how far the sort of knowledge of what life is that girls are allowed co-operates to produce these difficulties; but it *must* be questioned whether any data yet exist sufficiently secure to guarantee so momentous a change as any alteration of society's way with its girls.

The characters of a certain lithe vigour are those that issue most admirable from their metamorphosis.

And for them, where true hearts are wedded, all childhood's play, all maidenhood's vague dreams, all the *fiancée's* solid love, are not comparable to the secured love and joy and peace they find at their husbands' sides.

Listen to this woman leaning back against the rough granite of the pier, where a corner

in the masonry makes a nook of shelter. Her husband's arm is about her handsome shoulders, pressing her close to him to protect her from the rudeness of a hurricane wind. With one hand she presses her felt hat down on her brows, and with the other holds to an iron stanchion in the wall the more safely to keep her position.

‘Guy, people may well tell girls they only dream. I never knew what pleasure and happiness could be, or a man's goodness to a woman till these three weeks.’

‘I hope you may be able to say the same at the end of three years or thirty, dear,’ was the more laconic reply.

‘If you are still mine, Guy. You must not change to me, love. You have made me no more able to suffice to myself.’

‘I should be sorry to think that, Marcella.’

A wild storm is raging before them, from the sheltered point where they stand, visible in all its turbulence. About them the light is

dim, above the sky murky with thick blackness of rack and rain, driving before a furious wind, which, noisy with all the wailings of the tempest, howls and whistles about the pier. In front a vast expanse—from the point where the pier joining the shore closes in a swirling chaos of battling billows, all along the beach, beaten with foaming, roaring breakers, row on row, to where the seaboard changes to heightening vertical cliffs, against which the storm bellows with mountain waves bursting in thunders, and heaving and mounting up the rock's perpendicular face, with rent water and flying spray, on further till the rain pouring in deluges precludes the view; and far as the horizon—one terrific spectacle of frantic tumult, troubled and tossed and torn. Behind them, making the massy masonry quiver, the surges detonate with the crash of an explosion, shooting a hundred feet into the air great watery walls that fall in heavy showers on the unsheltered parts of the pier.

Not a soul is on the beach or esplanade. On the pier, under the shelters, some of them drenched in getting there, only a few sailors, a few gentlemen, and Laurier and Marcella. She had said, 'Take me to see the storm, Guy. I have never had an opportunity of seeing one as you could show it me.'

And now she suddenly exclaims, 'Oh, Guy, look, look at the cliff, it is going to fall!'

She is right, a great mass is coming down. From the headland it topples slowly forward, and then, seeming to move out from below, slips, gathering speed as it goes, down the face of the precipice, and in clouds of dust and foam, rushes into the sea, a crowd of stones and fragments of rock following, which leap out from the cliff into the water and go down with a splash.

'Well, that *was* a sight,' said Laurier.

'What do they make you feel, Guy? These raging tremendous powers, the mad storm, and wild sea, and hurricane, and falling cliff?'

‘It is very grand.’

‘You don’t love it a bit, Guy. Confess that you don’t. It does not mean half so much to you as a dusky court, and a grave man in a wig sitting under the royal arms, and twelve men wearied to suffocation in a kind of pew, listening to you gentlemen of the long robe asking quibbling questions. But, Guy, it goes through and through me, and makes me wild. Storm, and dazzling lights, and rushing sounds have a something in them that lures me to them and makes me wish to do with myself I know not what. I never felt it more than now. But then, I never had such thoughts as I have had since your life and mine have become one.’

Presently they turned to make their way homewards.

‘To-morrow we shall go back to town,’ observed Laurier.

‘Yes. I am quite looking forward to it,’ answered Marcella.

‘To the end of your honeymoon?’

‘For shame, Guy. You know I have enjoyed it as I never enjoyed anything, and, Guy, I hope you have. But weeks must come to an end, and it seems to me a vastly foolish thing to be unhappy because one has been happy. Now, the next thing is, we are going to be happy in another way, in our own home, and I am sure we are going to be very happy.’

The evening had come. Laurier was gone to the smoking-room of the hotel, the other inmates were scattered. In the great salon were only two ladies, at a writing-table, dotting down from a time-table notes for the continuation of their tour, and Marcella, her graceful feet rested on the fender, sitting alone by the fire, thinking.

Ten times the world she used to know is hers. All was so little, so imperfect, so half understood, and now her life so vivid, so wide, so deep! And how has all that been effected?

She cannot say, but it is so.

How good men are for women and to women! How gentle, how strong, how just, how kind!

What a terrible mistake for any thoughtful woman not to marry, nor mate her sensitive thought with the male thought of a man!

A man is not at all the creature she supposed him. He has so odd, and rough and ready a way, with all his thought, and not a scrap of intuition. She must be a strange creature in her husband's sight, so far more pensive than he about everything, and yet in judgment guided by a kind of instinct instead of by thinking.

Yet he will listen when she speaks, and try to see what it is she has understood that he has not.

Would she wish for his sake that she and he saw everything alike?

No. That would spoil all. It is their unlikeness that makes their life so bright.

The two ladies have finished their calculations and gone away. 'Poor young wife! She looks thoughtful,' said one to the other, as they left the salon. 'Yes,' was the reply, 'her husband has soon learned to leave her alone.' She has not heard them go. Nor does she notice someone coming across the room, till he puts his fingers into her soft brown hair. Then she throws her head back, smiling with pleasure into his handsome face.

'I have just heard a tale in the smoking-room, Marcella, that will interest you,' he said.

He leaned back against the chimney-piece, she looking up listening, and began a story, of how, at an hotel, some ten days previously, no less than four brides chanced to meet around the hearth, and of them three fell to talking of the excellence of dear Fred, dear Harry, and dear George. But the fourth, a proud, impenetrable-looking girl, rose and walked away, whilst the others exchanged meaning glances and surmised the sadness of her lot.

‘That was I, Guy,’ said Marcella.

‘I know it, my dear ; and am much obliged to you.’

Mrs. Cassilys did not leave town on the day of her daughter’s wedding, but remained to see the young people home, and everything made comfortable for their return.

So when, the next evening, Marcella and her husband reached home, the house was bright with flowers, and cheery and warm with blazing fires, and an excellent dinner had been ordered. In the library Laurier’s letters and papers were in order, and, most dear homely sight, Marcella’s beside them in a parallel row. In her room the things for her dinner toilet were ready without her having the trouble to unpack. Her mastiff—‘Dushan’ she had named him—appeared in the hall to welcome them, a little hazy in his canine mind concerning his relations to the cook, his best friend for the last month, and to the lady to whom he

actually belonged, but pleased enough to follow his mistress into rooms that cook forbade. In the course of dinner a short and cordial note arrived from Mrs. Cassilys with a present for her daughter, a memento of her coming to her home, and an invitation to both to take luncheon with her before her starting on the morrow in the afternoon for Liverpool ; until which time she left them to themselves.

Marcella at her mother's request saw her off from King's Cross.

The train was in motion, the last adieux exchanged. Marcella had taken a few steps by the side of the carriage, for a final pressure of her mother's hand, and still Mrs. Cassilys watched her. A minute she stood, a farewell smile on her lips, wafting a kiss from the tips of her fingers, and then, still seen, but unable any longer to see, as the train rolled away, turned on her heel easily with a dignified self-possessed air, and walked, graceful and in-

dependent, down the platform towards the egress.

‘Good,’ said Mrs. Cassilys to herself, still watching from the side window of the carriage, ‘that is what I wanted, my darling! My fears for her are ended.’

CHAPTER VIII.

BUT perils, alas, are not always ended when fears are ended, though for the present, it was to be confessed, everything seemed to assure the correctness of Mrs. Cassilys's opinion of security.

Marcella and her husband appeared to have solved the refractory problem of combining in actual life reality and idealism, happiness and love.

For a full apprehension of incidents to follow, some little detail of the circumstances of their new life is necessary.

After their return home their life under its new conditions took shape almost at once. A life in all particulars that of others of their station, the happiest for men and women to

choose, and yet so qualified by their own personal characteristics, so toned by little touches of taste and thought, and an unpretending consideration for each other, that its unseen tenor became as unlike the common stamp of negligent lives, as the easy sketches of a master's hand differ from the careless outlines of an amateur.

In it, as Marcella had predicted, they found themselves not *less* happy than before, but only happy in another way; one quieter, and also larger. More varied with all their resources around them, and—which a honeymoon can never be—at once durable of nature, and of a high order. A true instinct had spoken in Marcella's 'I am looking forward to going home,' and Laurier soon came to see it.

Their happiness was, however, of exceedingly different kinds, for happiness is a thing largely dependent upon disposition. His, by far the less conscious, of a quasi-negative type, an

emancipation from a burden of many previous anxieties and hindrances, and a corresponding impression of freedom, yet positive in his regard for his wife, a possession above possessions. Hers, above all intensely felt, and twice enjoyed, in apprehension and in fact, with all that sensitiveness to pleasure she possessed, which now made her an existence every one of whose thousand trifling details had its honeyed drop of enjoyment to distil with the great happiness of living with the man she profoundly loved.

That they only imperfectly understood each other, they had already learned to accept with a reciprocal *entente cordiale*. She knew him, without precisely comprehending the phenomenon, for a nature just, but rigidly hard, taking in life much less enjoyment than it contained, often in mind at issue with her mind. He knew her to be daringly pleasure-loving, but truth itself, so far as her thought could see, which was far—for of mental sight, of bizarre,

she occasionally showed herself curiously powerful ; if undecipherable, still a spirited creation, one that commanded his love, and might, very probably, in some circumstances have great need of his help.

This sort of reverence for the arcana of each other's natures, between a man and woman, is a sentiment higher than any pretence of a perfect intelligence, to which, respecting one another, human beings cannot arrive. It is deeper, more trusting, more humanising by far ; and safer, alike for the daily, and for the darker passages of life.

And in the meantime the love between the two had passed into the most delicious of unrestricted intimacies.

But to paint in its detail the daily way of two natures of opposite sex under ordinary conditions of existence happily mingling their lives together, would need the pencil of Bernardin de Saint Pierre :—These early breakfasts before the fire in the renaissance library, to

which Marcella came down in her lace-trimmed peignoir :—The young wife's walks, with no companion but her hound :—The half hours before dinner which, herself already dressed, she spent with her husband in his dressing-room, telling the simple story of her day, and lending interested ears to the incidents of his :—These ringings of musical laughter that told a merry story brought home to amuse her :—The long still evenings in the library, when he was pressed with work, and had brought it home; when she would sit or lie on the sofa out of his notice, silent, engaged in her own books and thoughts, but lifting her eyes from time to time for a look at him that brought smiles to her lips and love to her eyes :—These pensive hours at the grand piano, when the music moved the musician almost beyond herself, and made her fain at last to turn for change and repose to her plain sewing :—These pleasures and encouragements of his growing professional success :—These winter evenings when they read together, and

great masters woke in the brains of each thoughts so unlike aught the other could have imagined.

Theirs was not though, by any means, a life without society. Probably, had they desired it, 'the Lauriers' might have been great successes, for they became at once a new factor and a pleasant one in the circle to which they belonged, and found themselves surrounded by a very respectable coterie of acquaintances. Laurier's dinners were excellent. Mrs. Laurier, when invited to other houses, drew and appeared not to know it, and in her own house, entertained with grace and success. But they made it clear they were not about to engage in the great crush for the doors of certain drawing-rooms, to which that for the pit of a theatre can be compared neither for the weariness of its duration, nor the rudeness of the struggle.

They had, in fact, other views. Laurier was desirous enough for introductions of a kind,

those that would be professionally of service to him, and Marcella, prompt to be of assistance to him in so vital a matter, and one in which she could at the best help him but so little, was full of purpose to do all in her power to cultivate any such opportunity thrown in their way.

For her own part she found—it may without disparagement of her be confessed—with a faint surprise, that now she was married, her husband was to her more of an all in all of intimate society than she had anticipated. Some girlish dreams of a drawing-room of highly-cultivated and artistic society, found themselves easily contented to await an indefinite future for their realisation. That she retained, and as a married woman had been able to make it far more solid, the acquaintanceship of some men of the first abilities, may have had not a little to do with so great patience. Certainly the power to invite to her own house men whose society she knew to be

coveted, and justly coveted, and to entertain them no longer by proxy as her mother's, but now as her own and her husband's friends, friends too that she had had the prerogative of attracting to his house, reckoned among the proudest pleasures of her independence.

An existence of the pleasantest, however, is not without its battles, and in this connection may be adduced an incident not ill calculated to throw side light on a pertinent question, what degree of confidence might be rightly placed on the permanence of Marcella's and her husband's so great happiness.

It respected one of those acquaintanceships Laurier was anxious to form, and for his sake, his wife.

First calls had been exchanged, and an invitation to an 'at home' accepted, and both had been to the 'at home.' Returning home, Marcella said in the carriage, with a degree of pique she seldom exhibited,

‘I have never in my life been so pointedly snubbed.’

‘I am sorry, my dear; I fear they are people worth knowing.’

‘That may be, but I certainly am not of the temper to visit at a house where I am made to understand my presence is regarded as a tolerated intrusion. However, as we have done with them, we may as well forget all about them, and think of pleasanter subjects.’

Laurier made no reply, and she fell to talking of other things.

But the next day, after dinner—the matter had in the interim been digesting itself in his mind—Laurier, whilst cracking a walnut, said,

‘I am going to ask you to make me a sacrifice, Marcella. That is not without having thought about it. Call on the Farquhars, and see if you cannot coax them into accepting an invitation to come here.’

Marcella’s eyes clouded.

‘I was treated with rudeness there, Guy;

and I think my dignity is yours,' she said, with unmistakable pride.

'Yes, love. That is so. It is a humiliation. The only question is whether you can bend to it. If you can, it will be of service to me.'

There was a short pause, and then Marcella said,

'I will go, Guy.'

'Thank you.'

It was all he said. The subject was not again alluded to. A few days later, as he was washing his hands before dinner, Marcella said,

'I have been to call on the Farquhars, and they are coming to dine here on Tuesday week.'

Laurier looked at her an instant before speaking. 'Were they pleasant?' he asked.

'Hateful. But Mr. Farquhar chanced to come in, and mention was made of a Hollar that is in our collection downstairs, and I contrived to get them to accept an informal invitation to come and dine and see our prints.'

I hope they will be pleasanter here than they are at home.'

'I am much obliged to you, dear.'

'You are welcome, Guy.'

She began to relate the other events of her day.

When he had finished dressing, Laurier said, 'Come here, Marcella.'

She rose and came to him, wonderingly. He gently put his arm round her, and drew her bosom close against his, and then kissing her lips, said,

'I know what your pride is, wife. Yet I was sure you would stoop for me.'

'You were sure, quite sure?' she asked, holding back her head to look in his eyes.

'Quite.'

'You were right. Thank you.' And her lips came back to his.

Among the most frequent of their visitors were from the first Charley, and also by this time Keppel.

Charley at once accepted his cousin's house as a place of resort in lieu of Mrs. Cassilys's. Relations between the cousins remained unaltered. On the occasion of his first call, with both Marcella's hands in his, Charley looked at Laurier and asked significantly, 'May I?' and Laurier, conscious of two pairs of eyes watching for his answer, replied, 'My dear Curteis, you should have known you may, without asking.' On which the cousins exchanged a hearty kiss as of old. Afterwards if any change took place in their friendship it gathered strength, from that absence of possible consequences, which, where men and women are respectable and respecting one another, makes a solid intimacy between married men and women an easy thing.

Alone with Marcella Charley would talk long of Theo, and of his rare meetings with her, and mourn the slowness with which wealth even under favourable circumstances is obtained. If Marcella would have assented both Theo and

he would have been glad again to use her mediation to correspond. But Marcella demurred. Herself now a married woman she preferred rather to urge upon them both a clear duty to terminate the unreal, unnatural manner in which they were living, to acknowledge the truth to their respective parents, and to accept the consequences, however serious, of what they had done ; and, being man and wife, honestly to fight their battle of life side by side.

‘Very fine talk for an heiress, Marcella,’ replied Charley ; ‘but what the deuce should a poor beggar like I am do when Theo wanted things I could not give her ?’

In the case of Keppel the intimacy grew by small but rapid degrees. He himself wondered a good deal how much truth existed in the assertion that Laurier had taken his wife under conditions, and was perhaps inclined to believe it, except for Mrs. Curteis having told it him. He would have liked to believe it, and to have Laurier of the cast of mind which regards

marriage as a manœuvre for the acquisition of taxable advantages. He came first to see Laurier about some firm of solicitors, late one evening, and remained in the house but a few minutes. Then again, on some other business matter, in a way precisely similar. The third time he condescended to go into the drawing-room to see Mrs. Laurier, and to drink a cup of tea, and made Marcella a prettily-turned compliment on the taste her house evinced. Afterwards he came oftener, then oftener still, till he had imperceptibly grown to be the most frequent and one of the most familiar of visitors.

With Laurier his manner was unchanged ; towards Marcella fundamentally altered. Of the nettling, cynical bearing, the insinuated contempt, alike for the sex and condition of a girl, no vestige remained. Rather, no one entered her house whose behaviour towards Mrs. Laurier was more flatteringly faultless. Whether she owed it to having herself emerged from the insignificance of maidenhood, or to

the place her husband enjoyed in Keppel's esteem, or to her own acknowledged favour with Lady Julia Rintearn, or to causes of other kinds, Marcella debated without being able to decide. Her repugnance for Keppel, a survival of a time when she saw the world in other and fainter lights, was sometimes dimly present with her, at others silenced and rebuked by a sense of former small capacities to judge. For all practical purposes two considerations more than sufficed to decide her action. He was a man who had shown his regard for her husband in the most unequivocal ways, by unremitting, painstaking, valuable services ; and her husband desired him to be welcome in his house.

And welcome he was made.

Her old dislike to him, courteously veiled as it had been, had not, however, been able to escape Keppel's keen observation : and, incapable by temperament to understand the true nature of this welcome, he balanced in his mind between two theories respecting it :—one

that the woman's husband had commanded her to welcome him, and happened to be able to make himself obeyed :—the other that she made him welcome for reasons of her own.

Whichever was the case mattered not to Keppel.

Such, then, were the circumstances of the young couple when Mrs. Curteis first made her acquaintance with their establishment.

That was after Christmas. She had signified in a letter that she was coming for a few days to town. Some discussion passed between Laurier and his wife regarding the tone Marcella's reply to this letter should take. She was disposed to take this for an opportunity of commencing to break with her aunt. From this Laurier dissuaded her : and so instead, Mrs. Curteis was invited to the house.

She came, saw, and was satisfied.

Unlike Mrs. Cassilys, she sighted danger on every side.

The evening before she left (Laurier was dining with Keppel) she said to Marcella,

‘Your husband has soon begun to lose ground in his profession.’

It would infinitely better have served her purpose to be silent on the topic, but she owed her niece a good many grudges, and the pleasure of chafing the young wife on a tender point was uncommonly poignant.

‘To lose ground! Oh, that is entirely a mistake,’ rejoined Marcella, laughingly. ‘Mr. Laurier has never been more busy nor more successful.’

‘Ah, but don’t you see how this ease, and wealth, and the simple exemption from any necessity of work begin to tell on him? I observe a marked difference from his tone at Wyvenhome. There is none of the eagerness of a man who depends entirely on his own exertions now. Mr. Laurier goes to his work with a sort of indifference, and you can see the lack of zest in the way he speaks of it. You

will find by-and-by he will give it up. I fancy, do you know, that if he come later to think a fading wife a poor substitute for a great professional success, your lot by the time you are a middle-aged woman will not be an enviable one. But you are, you see, one of the women it costs men much to have known. You have made your husband rich, but you are going to cost him his career. That, probably, is not worth the trouble of regrets, men always over-rate what they are going to do, but of course it is inevitable.'

Marcella's blood was boiling in her veins. Possibly she was never in her life so savagely angry.

'The interruption of my husband's professional career would merit every regret,' she replied hotly; 'and it would cost me something beyond regrets, were I even indirectly the cause of so unhappy a misfortune. But as what you have chosen to say is beneath contempt we will change the subject. By what train do you leave to-morrow?'

But what had been said rankled in her like poisoned steel. When Laurier returned home, unusually late, she was still up awaiting him in the library.

‘Guy,’ she said energetically, rising to speak to him, her great grey eyes full of trouble and their lids heavy, ‘is there a syllable of truth in what I have heard said this evening?’—she repeated the substance of her aunt’s remarks—‘Oh, Guy, say there is not a shadow of truth in any of this!’

He put his foot on the fender and looked into the fire, making no answer.

‘Guy, Guy!’ implored Marcella. She was standing by his side and had caught his hand in both of hers, and now bent forward turning her head to look up sideways into his face.

It was rigid as stone : but he laid his other hand, reassuringly, on her shoulder.

‘There *is* truth in it, Marcella,’ he said, ‘but I never saw it, till now. You have saved me, love, from a great mistake. There : don’t

look frightened, I am warned in time. Kiss me.'

With what love he put his lips to hers, and with what a sense of her character's high and sterling worth !

CHAPTER IX.

It was an evening in February.

Laurier had come home with a bag full of papers, and announced an intention of working till late at night. Dinner had been got over a little more rapidly than usual, and after a short time in the drawing-room, Marcella had suggested that if he could begin his work half an hour earlier than usual he would profit by the additional half-hour's rest, and so he had gone to the library, and she with him, sooner than was their wont.

At this time Keppel called.

As the servant was about to conduct him to the drawing-room he said, 'I am come to see your master only, and am in haste: tell him I am in the library.'

He crossed the hall and himself opened the library door.

A large screen immediately within it prevented his seeing at the first instant that any one was in the lighted room, but a moment later a picture that arrested his steps presented itself to his view.

A short distance before him, but with his back to the door, Laurier sat by a table on which a reading-lamp burnt at his side. He held the large sheets of a brief in his hand, and leaning one elbow on the table was immersed in perusing them.

At the further end of the room, reclined on a broad divan, was Marcella.

She lay on her left side with her breast and shoulder supported against a couple of large cushions, which, one on the other, were placed obliquely before her. On their centre rested the elbow of her left arm, supporting on fingers bent among her hair a part of the weight of her head. Her other hand lay near her bent

knees. In it she held a book, which she had, no doubt, been reading, for her middle finger slipped in among the leaves kept her place. Beyond the folds and the many plaits of her skirt protruded a slender ankle and shapely delicate foot, daintily clothed in a clocked stocking and close-fitting slipper, whilst her handsome recumbent form, carelessly posed with a delicious grace, confessed in its bold lines at once its real strength and remarkable elasticity.

She wore a soft old gold silk—its train fell in folds from her feet to the floor, and the light that came from a lamp on a bracket affixed to the wall fell on the soft texture of the gown with every shade of blending dun and citron and gold. Her heavy fringe threw her forehead and eyes into shadow, but the light was full on the finished lines of her lower face, and gleamed on the white beauty of her arms, bare to the elbows, glittering on her bracelets, seeming to touch with gentleness the softness

of her delicate hair, and striking full on the modest glimpse her dress vouchsafed of a breast of a whiteness brunettes can seldom show.

Her eyes—their trembling light points were caught not from the lamp but from the fire—were fixed in a straight level gaze, and on her face a deeply pensive look told that her being had withdrawn into its innermost self, leaving her features relaxed and fixedly still, while her thoughts were for a time lost to all things of sense.

On the floor by his mistress's train, his head between his paws, lay Dushan. He first glanced at Keppel, and seeing one of the people it was his duty to respect, dropped his eyes again to a misty contemplation of his own felicity.

And now, whilst Keppel stood for a moment collecting with rapid eye the beauties of the tableau Mrs. Laurier made, her husband threw aside the sheets he held and took up some others.

Instantly her eyes moved and fell on him. A luminous smile woke on her face, which seemed, as it were, to melt till its brightness shone upon him a living golden love.

But he only went on with his work, and her eyes dropped again to the low level gaze, and her soul, which had come to her face for him, winged its way back to its shrine, and the stilly features retook their fixed repose.

Perhaps it all occupied ten seconds.

Keppel moved back towards the door, and once more concealed by the screen, sharply moved the handle of the door, opened and closed it, and with a marked tread again stepped back into the room.

Laurier looked round with the brief in his hands. Marcella was rising from the divan.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Keppel stopping, ‘but your servant told me you were upstairs, and, as I was in haste, I said I would step in here. I hope, Mrs. Laurier, I am not intruding.’

‘You are never an intruder in this house,

Mr. Keppel,' replied Marcella, giving him her hand, 'I am glad of an accident that gives me the pleasure of seeing you.'

Keppel sat down by Laurier, and began to speak rapidly of the object of his visit. It was but for a minute or two, but even in that short time Marcella had found space to slip from the room and to return, with astonishing little iridescent glasses and a decanter to match, containing green Chartreuse, on a small silver tray. Now, bending down to him, where he sat by her husband, she said,

'You must not refuse, Mr. Keppel ; I know your weaknesses ; and the night is cruelly cold.'

He looked at the beautiful arms that held the silver to serve him, and at her slender fingers folded about its edges, and at the faint blue vein in her wrist, and then up to her white neck and noble face, her wide brow, and the infinite depths of her eyes.

'Will you not pour it out for me, Mrs. Laurier?' he asked.

She immediately complied, and taking the full glass from the salver put it into his hand with a smile.

Then she turned to her husband, and saying only, 'Guy,' poured out another glass for him, with an air of thought, and set it on the table at his side.

Keppel's business was brief, and he rose almost immediately to go.

'I will see Mr. Keppel to the door, Guy,' said Marcella, anxious that Laurier should have every available moment for his work.

At the door, as she said, 'Good-night, Mr. Keppel,' he eyed her as a man who makes a calculation of what he would guess the price of a thing to be, but Marcella did not notice it.

At home in the Louis Quinze drawing-room Keppel sat before the fire, and smoked and thought.

Something had made on him an unwontedly pungent impression.

'—I would give a hundred pounds to know

how much and how little truth there is in what that liar Edith Curteis said about her.

‘How long will things continue thus? She is evidently fond of him. He does not seem to care much for her.

‘Unfortunately, that is just the way to retain a woman.

‘I wonder what Laurier would do under certain circumstances. He has sense. I suppose he would let affairs go on quietly.

‘If I were sure, I’d——. I suppose it will be wiser to leave it alone. I am sure, though, I cannot see why.’

This is what one vice has of most terrible : not that its egotism wantonly brings about wretchedness unspeakable, but that it makes its votaries believe all characters at the base like their own, that it cannot conceive of any truth of sentiment, and judges acts which revolt the ears but simple contingencies of an absolute indifference.

CHAPTER X.

THEO had need of all her coolness and mettle and of more.

Ill, cruelly ill, morning, noon, and even-tide : utterly cowed.

The period was long passed when she had been able to doubt what that illness signified, or to flatter herself with a hope that hers might be only mistaken alarms ; or, rather, a time was close at hand when concealment of her condition, even could she excuse the pain in her face, would be no longer, at any price, possible.

Poor Theo ! How she now blessed Mrs. Cassilys's forethought, which had insisted she should have given her those few names and signatures on a long strip of paper placed in

her hand in the vestry of Saint ——'s. When the worst came, as it must, and soon, that marriage certificate would at least stay the miserable imputation that she had forgotten all a girl owes to herself.

Only that was the utmost she dared to hope. Angry her parents would be, justly angry, and more than justly—of that she was positive. And in that anger what unimagined things would they say or do, or compel her to accept?

She had been bullied by her mother, and from time to time scolded, and sometimes sharply too. But that was only for trifles, for passing scrapes. Her life, taken in its entirety, had been one of indulgence and kindness. She had never come into disgrace, and what treatment would be measured to an actual misdemeanour was a problem she had no data to solve. And she had little strength of any kind left now, and cowered with fainting spirits before the dreaded unknown.

The thought of her parents gnawed at her conscience. They had been good and just to her, and she unjust and undutiful to them. That she would make a successful match they had counted for certain. They believed in her face, in her dashing way, in her address of a practised coquette to bring down anything—short of a royal duke. Her brothers had done well, and pleased her father and mother, and she had played the defaulter—had married a penniless younger son, and balked at a stroke her parents' loving ambitions on her behalf. No better, dearer fellow than Charley lived, and she, in her heart, was proud to have been chosen for his wife; but she knew her father and mother, and was not blind enough to suppose her moneyless cavalier would appear in their eyes in the light in which hers saw him. In the school according to whose precepts she had been taught love did not count in marriage for a factor of serious import.

Her delicate condition intensified the shadows of her self-reproaches and fears.

Some last ones perhaps deserved to be reckoned the best founded of all. Those which the instinct of motherhood woke, speaking with accents not to be silenced of another life beyond doubt jeopardised by the *ménagements* and shifts and imprudences used to conceal the truth.

Why had she not faced the storm as soon as she perceived it inevitable? She had again and again determined to do so; to confess the truth; and to accept the consequences. But when the occasion arrived she wavered and postponed till the morrow the scene she scarcely dared to imagine.

For a woman in her condition it was perfectly excusable.

One evening (her mother was gone to a soirée from which she had with much difficulty, but with more thankfulness, managed to get excused) she had, with a girl's faith in her

father's pitifulness with her womanhood, determined to avow her condition to Mr. Stryne, and folded her marriage certificate, with the two rings inside it, in her bosom, to be ready to produce it at a moment. But, though she twice essayed it, she never spoke. So hot a blush flamed up on her cheeks when her lips had to frame a name for her trouble, that, though loth to lose it, she was constrained to let the occasion go.

It was now Easter. They were staying at Brighton. Mr. Stryne had not been well, and their life was quieter than ordinarily, and the comparative rest and the change of air were doing Theo good. Had she dared to acknowledge herself poorly, the rest might have been absolute. But the dull dread of she knew not what drove her still, in spite of daily remarks on her delicate appearance, to persist she was perfectly well, and to go about more than she should to give *vraisemblance* to what she said.

One morning, they had just finished break-

fast, and Mr. Stryne had removed from the table to an arm-chair, taking his paper with him. Mrs. Stryne still sat at the table, and Theo had gone to the window to look out over the pier and the sea.

The day was exquisite but she had no sense of it.

Presently Mr. Stryne accidentally let his paper fall from his hand, and said, 'Come and pick up my paper for me, Theo.'

The girl's brows contracted, but she smoothed them and turned from the window. She knew that what was asked was going to hurt her, but she walked straight to the spot, and resting one hand in as careless a way as she could feign on the arm of the chair, and turning her back to her mother, awkwardly bent her knee and picked up the paper.

As she went back to the window her eye caught a look of her mother's face. Its expression made her heart sink.

Mr. Stryne left the room. Theo had taken

a book, and was pretending to read, with the letters swimming in confusion before her. Mrs. Stryne came with a sharp step to the back of her chair, and took her by the shoulder.

‘What is the matter with you, Theo?’ she asked in a voice that made Theo think she should faint.

‘Nothing, nothing,’ gasped Theo, trying to hold herself erect and failing. Her hands sank into her lap, and the book dropped to the ground, the lines of her tall figure gave way, her head, with her long neck arched, fell back against the chair-back, and her lips parted with pain. The next instant she recovered herself with a start, and attempted to pick up her book, and found she could not, and said desperately,

‘I don’t know, I think I have a headache.’

Her mother pushed a chair to her side, and began scanning her with a look Theo essayed to shun.

Then she threw herself suddenly on her knees at Mrs. Stryne's feet, and hiding her face in her lap, stammered out,

‘Mamma, I am ill. Don’t scold, don’t scold. I have done no wrong. Don’t scold me. I will tell everything, truly, only don’t scold me.’

After which, imploring between every sentence not to be chidden, she avowed the whole affair.

Her mother said never a word, only at the end, ‘You had better lie down, I am going to speak to your father.’

In half an hour she returned.

‘Your father wishes to see the certificate of your marriage,’ she said.

Theo fetched it and unfolded it before her. Two rings were inside, a wedding ring, and an engaged ring never yet worn. Whilst her mother read the document, Theo sat down a little way from her, and with a pensive face drew the rings on her third finger.

There was something of pride in the action, something too of relief, and something of sorrow. The sloping sunlight from the window fell athwart on her where she sat, and her weary face, with its cloud of frizzled black hair, and long, pain-shadowed eyes, took, in her many emotions, a beauty beyond its own.

Mrs. Stryne left with the certificate. Another half-hour and she returned. Theo's eyes, for her lips dared not, inquired what had passed, but her mother made no response, and sitting down in silence commenced to add up some accounts.

‘Mamma,’ at last said Theo, speaking with an effort, ‘what does papa say?’

Mrs. Stryne looked up. Her face was a trifle pale. But she made no answer.

‘Mamma, tell me.’

Still silence.

Theo thought. Now the crisis was over her old self was returning.

‘If you cannot tell me, I shall go and myself speak to papa,’ she said firmly.

Then Mrs. Stryne answered, ‘He refuses to see you, or to speak to you.’

Theo heaved a long sigh, and the tears came to her eyes. A minute or two she spent with her handkerchief wiping off her long lashes the heavy drops as they formed. Then she said abruptly,

‘I shall go to my husband.’ Her mother made neither movement nor remark, and she continued, rising to go to the door, ‘I am going to pack.’

Mrs. Stryne arrested her. ‘No, you must not pack. If you are going I will pack for you.’

‘Will you, mamma? If you would, please.—A few things: what I shall most want. I ought to go to my husband ought I not? It is best. I may go, mamma?’

Her mother lifted her eyebrows, and made with her hand a gesture of indifference. ‘If

you wish your things packed, I will pack them,' she said.

With 'miss' at the conclusion the words might have come from the lips of the lady's-maid.

Theo winced.

'If you please, mamma,' she said dropping her eyelids.

Mrs. Stryne went. Theo sat down by the fire. This was terrible indeed! That was all she could think of. Soon a servant entered.

'If you please, *Ma'am*, Mrs. Stryne wishes me to take her anything of yours that is in this room.'

Theo gave her the few things she called her own. Were her parents about to disown her? It appeared so, for at the end of an hour the servant came back, bringing her hat and cloak and travelling things, with the message,

'Your luggage is in the hall, *ma'am*. Luncheon is ready for you downstairs: and Mrs. Stryne wishes me to say, that she and Mr. Stryne will leave Brighton to-morrow.'

‘Where are they going?’

‘It is not yet decided, ma’am.’

Theo saw the mistake she had made in inquiring.

The luncheon—it well-nigh choked her—was ended, and she returned upstairs. But no father or mother were anywhere to be found. She took a sheet of note paper, and wrote on it a few words of farewell, passionate words for a girl of a nature such as hers. Then, she could do no more, she made her way to the hall.

All was clear. Her parents meant to have nothing more to do with her. She went down the stairs with hanging head, and a bursting heart, scarcely keeping back, for appearance sake, the tears to which she would fain have given their flow.

There was a place in shadow on a turning of the hotel stairs. At the moment she came there, an unseen hand quickly caught her own, pressing something into it. Theo stopped and looked round.

It was her father.

‘Papa!’ she exclaimed, and her guilty head drooped before him.

He still held her hand. ‘There, there, there,’ he mumbled out, ‘don’t hang your head, my girl. Your husband is a good fellow. Try to be a better girl to him, Theo, and don’t hang your head.’

He caught her face in his hands and kissed her with a quick ‘Good-bye, daughter,’ which was not without pain and, perhaps, not without some reproach; and before Theo had time to reply a word—it would have been to crave his pardon—was gone.

The same evening Marcella was dining alone, when the servant entered and announced, ‘Mrs. Curteis; I told her you were at dinner, ma’am, but she said she must see you, and would wait.’

‘It will never do to let aunty wait,’ thought Marcella. She rose from the table, and went to the drawing-room. A tall figure, unlike

Mrs. Curteis's, stood near one of the windows in the waning light of the April day. The lamps in the drawing-room were not yet lighted, and to distinguish things was not possible. Marcella advanced with an impression of having to do with a stranger of some impertinent kind, and was meditating how she should be most quickly disembarrassed of her company, when the visitor caught the sound of her steps, and turning advanced to meet her.

‘Theo!’ exclaimed Marcella.

For all reply Theo threw herself into her friend's arms.

Within three minutes Marcella knew all. Theo's condition and how it had become known: that her parents were inexorable, and had as good as turned her out of doors, but that her father had at the last moment kissed her and wished her good-bye and given her a cheque for a hundred pounds, and that she was come to town to seek her husband.

‘But, Theo, you have, I hope, been first to

him, before you came to me?' asked Marcella, whose views of the prerogatives of husbands were become very definite.

'Oh yes!' rejoined Theo, rather, however, as if she repented it, 'I have been twice to his rooms, and once to his place of business, but he was not at either; and, as I could see the people with whom he boards regarded my visit with suspicion, I thought I would come to you.'

'And I am delighted to see you. Leave your things here, and come down stairs and have some dinner. I am sure you are hungry.'

Theo made no attempt to deny it.

As they were just about to leave the room Marcella paused an instant.

'I am so glad, Theo,' she said, 'that you have come to Charley. We have no friends like our husbands, Theo, and it was a good impulse of yours to come at once to him. Now you will live together, and you do not know how much fonder of each other and how much

happier you will be. I am sure of it. Don't look anxious. You are tired, I can see. Come and have something to eat.'

Theo was anxious, however, very anxious. The cause was not long in coming to light. In the drawing-room after dinner, lying on the sofa, she broke a little silence with an abrupt,

'I do wonder what Charley will think?'

'He'll be very glad, Theo,' replied Marcella encouragingly.

'I don't think he expected anything like this,' said Theo, mournfully looking down on the ground.

'He must have expected it, dear. He knows, of course, how you are?'

'No, he does not.'

'That was not right, Theo.'

'I did not wish him to know. I wanted not to worry him. I do wonder what he will say. And we shall be so awfully poor, and I am so ill, and weary, and spiritless. And I

am not at all sure that I am what Charley thinks me. He always made me out so much better than I am. We seem to have got married I don't know how. What shall I do, Marcella, if after all he does not want me?'

Marcella had risen whilst she spoke, and now sat herself on the edge of the sofa taking one of Theo's hands in her own.

'Theo,' she said gently, 'you don't know. I did not know till I had lived with my husband. Don't be afraid, dear. Men are good and tender with their wives in a deep, strong way you and I never thought of when we were girls. And it is when we are weakest that they are tenderest and most patient of our needs. There is no love and no kindness like a husband's, Theo. Only you must remember, dear, they are not in the least like ourselves. We have to trust them a great deal, just as they trust us a great deal, because we are a tremendous puzzle to them, I assure you. And, dear, it is our place to speak the truth to our

husbands trustfully and unreservedly, and you ought to have told Charley. Charley and Guy care for you and me much more than they understand us, and unless there is a frank confidence on both sides, they cannot help us when they would, Theo.'

Theo did not answer. A long time she retained Marcella's hand, and seemed to be pondering what had been said. Then she looked up and withdrawing her hand, said, 'I am tired. May I have a little nap?'

Marcella returned to the fire, and in a few minutes Theo was asleep.

Half an hour, and then the sound of a well-known step on the stairs fell on Marcella's ears.

She rose, and sped across the room, and confronted Charley on the top of the stairs.

'I am glad you are come to-night,' she said, 'I have something to show you in the drawing-room.'

'What is that?'

‘Something asleep. Come and see. Don’t make a noise.’

She so led him into the room and to the sofa that it was not till he was just in front of it that he could see Theo lying asleep, her slender fingers knitted together by her knee, and her head gracefully bent on the satin pillow.

‘Is it not Theo?’ said Charley, perplexed.

‘Hush! You must not startle her. She is not at all well, and her parents have found out what has happened, and she has come to London to seek for you.’

Charley nodded a nod of intelligence. There was a long, silent pause whilst they both stood regarding the sleeping girl. Then Charley said,

‘Leave us alone, Marcella.’

She complied. Charley sat down as she had done on the edge of the sofa, and drawing his wife’s hand into his own gently awaked her.

Two hours afterwards, when he was gone, Theo, bidding Marcella good-night, said,

‘You were right, Marcella. I little knew how much my husband loved me.’

CHAPTER XI.

AT the beginning of May Mrs. Curteis came to town with Florelle, to remain five weeks.

Florelle was permitted no misapprehension of the purpose of her visit. She was to be on exhibition for marriage.

The time was a cruel five weeks for Flo. Unaccustomed excitements drew on her strength, and her mother gave her stimulants that made her feel ill. These poisons took the lustre from her eyes and cheeks, and the paint pot came into daily use. Fast girls told her things she dreaded lest her mother should learn she had come to know. If ever—for young natures love not to grieve—the gaiety woke for an hour or an afternoon a response of pleasure in herself, there was ever ready to

eclipse it the dread of being given a victim to some man she detested, an event to be followed by a future filled with nothing but fears.

But Florelle learned a momentous truth. There exists in gentle-natured children a faith in their parents, even when unkind, which is about as beautiful as any mistake can be, and till this, Florelle had believed in her mother. But amid the things that now happened that faith passed away. She did not willingly give it up, but she could not avoid the things that passed before her eyes, nor the conversation of the girls she met, and the truth would not be evaded. Mothers like hers were exceptions. Most girls were loved and cared for in a way in which none had ever loved or cared for her. People pitied girls with mothers resembling hers; they pitied herself, yes, very much. Then came a day when she overheard a fragment of a conversation in which her mother was called a 'barbarous' woman. Florelle's cheeks blushed angrily, but her judgment gave

its assent. The truth making itself indistinctly felt assumed exact proportions the moment someone gave it a name. Her mother *was* barbarous. Barbarous in her severity, barbarous in her strictness, barbarous of thought, barbarous even when she meant to be kind.

But Florelle shuddered at it. She was not made to contend with barbarity. It terrified her, turned her every sense to fear.

So miserable, indeed, was the impression she made upon Marcella when they accidentally met, a day or two later in the park, that the latter, in the evening, spoke of her alarms concerning Flo to her husband.

‘A little fool,’ said Laurier, ‘why should you trouble yourself about her?’

He disliked Florelle.

‘No, Guy. Flo is not little, neither is she a fool.’ And she added something about her aunt, and the girl’s miserable chance.

‘Conceded,’ replied Laurier, ‘her father idly leaves his duty to his wife, and his wife

is, well, a woman. What can you expect?’

‘Guy, you are incorrigible. All women are not bad, sir. Your wife, for instance, Mr. Impudence.’

And she chucked him under the chin with a smile.

‘No,’ rejoined Laurier, ‘but the greater part of you, my dear, are, to quote a young female I had the pleasure of cross-examining this morning, “very middling.”’ His tone changed abruptly, and he asked, ‘What is it you wish to do, dear?’

‘To have Florelle to stay some months with me. You and I can save that girl’s existence, Guy; and we owe it to her helplessness to do it.’

‘Now there, love, you are wrong. You and I *cannot* save Flo. If you have her here, she will vaguely imitate you for a time, and then, when she returns home, relapse to what you see; which, unless my experience misleads me, will end badly for Miss Flo.’

‘Hush, Guy. No. Can nothing be done for her? Flo’s is a fine nature, Guy, if her mother had not broken it to pieces.’

‘Your aunt, my dear,’ replied Laurier, ‘is a devil. As long as Florelle is possessed of a devil how can anything be done for her?’

‘Something shall be done, Guy. It is monstrous that the poor child should be left to drift to her ruin.’

‘Well, I suppose some man must be found to marry her.’

‘Will that be any remedy, Guy?’ asked Marcella, pointedly.

‘I shall be sorry for both of them. I will tell you what you must do, Marcella. Get your mother to take Flo out and out under her protection.’

Marcella thought.

‘I fear aunty will never permit it,’ she said, mournfully, ‘but we can try.’

Florelle saw but little of her cousin. Mrs. Laurier’s set was not Mrs. Curteis’s. Far from it.

The difference between the tone of her cousin's house and that of the other houses she entered was among the earliest of Florelle's society impressions. For her own part she at first thought she preferred her cousin's set, but a grand dinner party at the Lauriers' changed her opinion. The people were so dreadfully clever, and she at so absolute a loss in their society : for no one had ever let her know that to intellectual people a girl who would fain know more may always confess her simplicity with grace. In consequence she became ridiculously afraid of going to her cousin's house.

‘Cousin Marcella,’ she said to herself, ‘has always been rich and clever and had everything she wished. Now she is married and has got to be grander than ever. All kinds of clever people go to her house, and talk to her, and admire her, and she is a great success, and does not know how to be happy or proud enough. I am sure she cannot want to see me, who, it

is only too clear, am simply a miserable, despicable failure.'

So invitations to the Lauriers', friendly or formal, were alike declined.

And in another atmosphere, to tell the piteous truth, poor Flo lost moral being day by day, and began rapidly to sink to a condition akin to nothing but that of passive matter, at any one's disposal who might choose either to use or abuse.

Happily return to Wyvenhome came in time to cut short her career to destruction. Accident, kinder than her mother, also suffered her to return home, well chidden indeed for wasted opportunities, but unbetrothed. Her beauty had obtained her more than one offer of marriage, but Mrs. Curteis, in every case dissatisfied with the suitor's fortune, had given for her negative replies.

Marcella scarcely realised how little she had seen of her. She was herself exceedingly occupied. It was her first season too,

in another way; the first in which she had had a house of her own, and entertainments to give, and courtesies to return. Handsome and extraordinarily agreeable she was coming out with *éclat*, and honourably exerting herself to gain for her husband that social consideration which only the co-operation of a clever wife obtains.

As for Laurier, the unintentional warning fallen from the lips of Mrs. Curteis had been taken by him in tremendous earnest, and his professional work commanded his undivided attention, and the whole bulk of his time.

It followed as a consequence that his own life and his wife's had assumed lines more than ever diverse. The difference between his hard, and her pleasure-loving nature served to give additional force to the contrast of lives running in channels so different, and the inconsistency between the husband and wife became a subject of common remark.

But before Mrs. Curteis left town other

whispers began, timidly at first, to steal about. Something concerning one cousin Charley, who was always at Mrs. Laurier's but never with his wife; and something concerning Hunt Keppel being exceedingly intimate there, and very 'kind' to Mr. Laurier: and something about Laurier's way of regarding this and that, which would be perfectly intelligible if some people knew all other people knew.

What was said of Charley was true: he was constantly at the Lauriers' and Theo was never with him.

That had come to pass on this wise.

Charley and Theo dined at the Lauriers' soon after Theo came to her husband. It may be remarked parenthetically that as Laurier was from home the evening Theo came to town, so, strangely enough, he was on this evening also. unexpectedly but unavoidably absent, an accident later of tremendous consequence, inasmuch as Theo did not know him by sight. Afterwards Marcella several times

invited them, but Theo always declined. The spectacle of the Lauriers' wealth contrasted a little too bitterly with her own poverty, and besides, going out to dinner cost money.

So Charley came to his cousin's house in his old bachelor fashion, and Marcella in return visited Theo in her lodgings. She did more. In her frank way, with a dozen words from her warm heart, she persuaded Theo not to read into idle words their girlish friendship at Folkestone, but to accept a present for her baby and for herself, as a congratulatory gift on the little mortal's approaching arrival. No tact or coaxing would ever have brought Theo, every jot as proud as herself, to assent, but Marcella's 'You and I, Theo,' had a power that could have riven defences of steel.

Theo herself was facing her poverty nobly, and concealing from her husband the sense of depression necessity cost her. That depression may perchance have betokened no very lofty temper of mind; if

so, Theo had never made pretence to any. Certainly it was very real and lay a heavy weight on Theo's soul. To put on her common clothes, a sight of her cheap gloves, the consciousness of inferior boots, each meal served in the nondescript odd hardware of the lodging-house, every view of her shabbily furnished rooms cost Theo a stab of pain, and that of the acutest humanity knows, the sense of having degraded. One afternoon, in the West End, in view of the well-dressed women, and their beautiful horses, the dainties and luxuries of the great shops, and the presence of that higher world in which she had once freely mixed, she broke down in tears on Charley's arm. Still she kept from him the cause.

But as time wore on Theo, delicate and nervous, and growing fretfully anxious concerning herself, for little more than want of a subject, began to be dissatisfied and querulous about the frequency of Charley's visits to his cousin, and would, on his return home, say things of

which she was heartily ashamed as soon as they had passed her lips—that is, could not be recalled. These speeches did not much distress Charley, who lightly attributed the whole to his wife's state of health, and knew that for two visits of his at Kensington, Marcella came thrice to see Theo, but they unhappily led to his being reticent concerning where he had been, and to his permitting his wife, on most of the occasions of his calls at the Lauriers', to suppose he had been otherwise engaged.

Had he given that procedure the briefest thought he would doubtless have seen all its inconsiderateness. But Charley was not made of thoughtful materials, and so, carelessly slipped into a habit of deceiving a wife he sincerely loved, and had every reason to treat with the most attentive consideration.

Meanwhile the season came to an end. Those who could leave and had not yet left were fast going out of town. The Lauriers still remained awaiting the end of the sit-

tings, Laurier with his hands crowded with work.

One afternoon in July Marcella went to a carnation show at the Horticultural Gardens. There were few people there, but to her surprise she met Keppel, who had, he said, returned to town on pressing business. It was a summer day, towards the close of the afternoon, delicious in the extreme, and, leaving the flowers, they strolled into the gardens and walked up and down the turfed *allées* between the avenues of young trees.

By degrees their talk assumed an exceedingly intimate tone. At no time had Keppel been so agreeable, or so exhibited to her his knowledge of the world, and the immense and varied resources of conversation at his command.

He had of late been urging Laurier to engage in politics, and it was this subject they fell to discussing. Marcella held back from the project, and Keppel now traversed the whole

subject with her, backwards and forwards, and in every light. The advantages, the difficulties, the opportunities, the aid Keppel himself could give, the assistance her own address would so certainly afford her husband, were measured to her one by one, with an attention to what she herself urged that surpassed flattery, and all without any attempt to convince, as a man would put a case in which both were concerned before the judgment of another man.

After a time what was said caused a change in the subject of their conversation to the wider one of the end and happiness of life. In which discussion of wealth, ambition, rank, culture, romance, art, and arcadia, Keppel again displayed no less *verve* and originality, no less variety and profundity of view than he had previously shown respecting politics and knowledge of the world. Nor was he more than before disposed to overbear the far-differing views of his little less brilliant companion,

and her intense faith in the supreme wisdom of a search after happiness.

And at the same time, in what the man of a purposeless existence said of life lurked a tone of a shadowy melancholy, that, for a woman of keen observation, made a delicate contrast with the clearness and keenness of his knowledge of the world.

Marcella felt that she had for the first time in her life caught a glimpse of Keppel's real self—a glimpse that awakened a great curiosity to know more of a character of a fine and sensitive nature that kept itself out of the way of the knowledge and sympathies alike of women and men.

She invited him to dinner, and he accepted. After dinner he and Laurier sat long over their wine, and Keppel talked much of his conversation with Marcella.

‘She is, for a young woman, one of the most imposing women I have met,’ he said. ‘I do only hope that when she has exhausted the

licit of pleasure, she won't be for stepping over the traces.'

He had a manner of saying things of this description that made taking offence at them ridiculous.

Laurier—he hated to speak of Marcella, and had been most of the time silent—replied only,

'If you really will not be persuaded to take another glass of wine, shall we go upstairs and join her?'

Keppel positively declined the wine, and they went upstairs.

Laurier's manner perplexed him.

'Always,' he reflected, 'the same respecting his wife, pointedly impenetrable. There must be some reason. Only he is a man so reticent when he chooses it. Would he regard a quiet *liaison* of Mrs. Laurier's reasonably? I suppose he would if other circumstances made it worth his while to do so. Yet I am very uncertain about him.'

CHAPTER XII.

THREE months, eventless, except that Theo in the course of the time presented Charley with a son.

Then unexpectedly the clouds gathering for years burst in a moment.

It was now October. The Lauriers had been abroad, and had returned to town. Everything resumed its former routine, changed only a little, as all things must be changed by the simple lapse of time. Keppel's visits were resumed, and Charley came to call as of old, and Marcella went to see Theo, who, instead of feeling her poverty more sharply, as she had anticipated, somehow forgot it in her interest in her baby.

Mrs. Curteis had come to town for ten days,

and was staying with the Lauriers. She had Florelle with her. The latter seemed altered since Marcella had last seen her. She had grown to look older, and much of her childish manner was gone, but it was difficult to see in what she had advanced, excepting in age and indifference.

The day following their arrival, Marcella, visiting Theo, accidentally let fall a remark respecting something Charley had said to her.

‘When did he tell you that?’ asked Theo.

‘I am not sure. It was not yesterday; it may have been Wednesday, or perhaps the day before. I don’t think it was on Sunday. Why?’

She was astonished to find Theo staring at her in the blankest amazement.

‘What!’ she said, as if uncertain that she had comprehended the meaning of Marcella’s words, ‘you saw Charley on Sunday, and Tuesday, and Wednesday, and yesterday. You see him almost every day?’

‘Yes, some two or three times a week,’ answered Marcella, mystified. ‘He dined with us yesterday. Did you not know it?’

‘Dined at your house!’ gasped Theo.

‘Yes.’

The two women stood eyeing each other. Marcella began to have a sense of something amiss; to suspect Charley was deceiving his wife, to regret it, to wonder what was the cause, to ask herself did Theo, after all, resent that she was not at Kensington as often as her husband. A succession of rapid expressions chased one another across her face, surprise, annoyance, doubt, perplexity. Theo watched each in turn with provocation in her own dark eyes.

Suddenly she said, with an assumed ease, ‘There is some mistake, Marcella. Charley perhaps forgot to tell me. Go on with what you were saying.’

Marcella complied. But there was an embarrassment between them which neither

was able entirely to disguise. When Marcella left, it was with a resolution, if, as she suspected, Charley had not been altogether straightforward with his wife, to put his inconsiderateness before him in the plainest of terms.

Theo, on his return home, charged her husband with deceiving her. Charley on the spot acknowledged himself guilty. He made very light of the whole matter, calling it ‘all just nothing,’ saying he knew Theo had more sense than to take it to heart, and explaining how his behaviour had originated only with a desire not to chafe her when she was unwell. After which Charley was persuaded in his own mind that he had satisfied Theo. Theo, however, was more hurt than she cared to confess even to herself.

Under these critical circumstances, some day or two later, a couple of accidents sufficed to give birth in an hour to very strange complications.

About four in the afternoon his father's card was brought to Charley in his office, with an announcement that Mr. Curteis awaited him below, and wished to see him without delay. Assured of some very urgent cause for so unexpected and impatient a visit, Charley hastened to the waiting-room. Mr. Curteis was restlessly walking up and down, his face pallid to a degree, his appearance broken and miserable.

‘This is something to do with Ned,’ thought Charley.

His father held in his hand a letter, and without reply to either greeting or questions, held it out for him to take and read. Then he went to the window, and with his back to his son, stood looking out.

Charley had not been mistaken. The letter was from his eldest brother—a miserable, incoherent, ill-spelled scrawl, but of meaning too plain. About the middle Charley changed colour, and with a kind of vertigo, sank into a

chair and leaned on the table to finish its perusal.

Ned had earned himself the law's last penalty, and wrote from a foreign gaol for his father and mother to come and bid him farewell.

Charley was the first to speak.

‘Mother must never hear of this, father.’

‘I cannot say how thankful I have been she was not at home when the letter came,’ replied his father. ‘I should not have been able to keep it from her.’ He concluded in a timid tone, ‘I can’t face this alone, Charley.’

‘You and I must go together, father, and at once.’

‘Shall we be able to keep it secret, Charley?’

‘We must. Think of Flo. I am thankful I am married. I should have had some hesitation about asking a woman to have me after this.’ Then he inquired quickly, ‘What have you said at home?’

‘ Nothing, except that I told the house-keeper I should be away a few days. What is to be done, Charley?’

‘ You and I must start immediately. When we come back we shall be able to give some account of Ned, and afterwards we must stick to it.’

He sent for paper and ink, and wrote a hurried note to Theo; and then they started for Charing Cross, purchasing on the way some necessaries for their journey. Neither he nor his father dared venture going home to be questioned, and, indeed, there was barely time.

About the same time a telegram arrived at his house at Kensington for Laurier.

Marcella and Mrs. Curteis were having afternoon tea. The latter was dressed to go out. She had promised Charley to come to see her grandchild, and would not go till late in the afternoon, because he would not be at home, and she wished Theo to feel she did not

like her, a fact with which poor Theo was already fully acquainted.

An agreement existed between Marcella and her husband, by which they never read each other's letters, but each, in the absence of the other, opened each other's telegrams, and Marcella at once opened this one.

It was from clients in Paris, requesting that Laurier would immediately come over. 'Just at the beginning of the sittings,' said Marcella aloud.

'No bad news, Marcella, I hope?' said Mrs. Curteis.

'Oh, no. Only Guy will have to go to Paris, and I know it will put him to considerable inconvenience. I wish they had telegraphed to his chambers; it would have saved us an hour, and he is so pressed for time.'

A message was despatched, and a reply returned, instructing Marcella what preparations to make, and mentioning that Laurier would return home for an hour before leaving town.

In the meantime Mrs. Curteis had departed. Later she came back with the news that Charley was not at home. This she said in a significant way, but her niece failed to observe it. She was busying about the house, waiting on her husband, who had returned home later than he had anticipated, with not a minute to spare, and with notions about what he would require to take with him entirely different from what Marcella had anticipated.

At length, everything arranged as he wished, he asked,

‘What are you going to do to-night, dear?’

‘I am going to dine at the Cancrolls. If I can be of no more service to you, I will go now and dress.’

‘Yes.—Be sure you go to that at-home at the Farquhar’s on Thursday, and make every explanation for me. And—let me see—I shall leave some letters here for you to put into envelopes and despatch. And if you are going to dress, I’ll say good-bye now, dear. I

shall not have time, perhaps, to come upstairs, and if you are dressing you will not be able to come down, so '—he rose and taking her in his arms kissed her twice—'good-bye, darling; make yourself happy.'

'Good-bye, Guy; and mind you come back to me safe and sound.'

She left him, and he sat down to dash off some half a dozen letters, and to select a number of papers, which he thrust into a travelling-bag.

Whilst he was so occupied Keppel came in. He had mentioned a day or two before that he was coming to borrow some book. Now, after a few words from Laurier, he said, 'Please don't disturb yourself. I know where the book is,' and going to the shelf took down the volume. Then his eye caught sight of a new pamphlet lying on one of the tables, and he took it up, and began to turn over the leaves.

Upstairs Marcella was dressing.

'If you please, ma'am, can you see Mrs.

Charles Curteis?’ asked a servant, coming to the door.

‘Theo! What can have brought her here?’ thought Marcella. ‘I hope there has not been a quarrel between her and my aunt.’ She said, ‘Tell Mrs. Charles Curteis I am dressing. If she will be so kind as to wait, I will be with her in a short time.’

The servant returned.

‘Mrs. Charles Curteis wishes, if you please, to see you at once, ma’am.’

‘Ask her to come up here,’ said Marcella.

In a few minutes Theo entered.

Marcella, in her peignoir, was sitting before the toilet-table, the lady’s-maid dressing her hair. As Theo approached, Marcella, without rising, held out her hand, looking up and saying, ‘How do you do, Theo?’

But passing the proffered hand, and without a word, Theo walked straight up to the dressing-table, and suddenly stopping, stood, her tall figure bent slightly forward, looking down

at Marcella. She was dressed in a long brown ulster, which she had partially unbuttoned, showing her inexpensive but tasteful black dress. About her neck were some black laces fastened over her shoulder by a brooch, and a brown felt Rembrandt hat daintily set on her luxuriant hair threw heavy shadows over her brows and her dark, long-lashed eyes, adding an indistinctness to the tigress beauty of her terribly passionate face.

Marcella knitted her brows and instinctively drew back in her chair as she asked, 'Theo! what has happened?'

'Will you ask your lady's-maid to leave us alone?' returned Theo in a voice of steel, as she drew herself up, and at the same time threw the servant a glance which was itself a command to go.

Marcella complied, Theo's passionate eyes watching the woman's departure from the room. When the door closed behind her, she turned abruptly to Marcella, and bringing

down her knuckles with a sharp blow of defiance and contempt on the toilet-table, asked in a voice of dignity and command,

‘Can you guess why I am come, Mrs. Laurier?’

‘I am simply bewildered,’ replied Marcella, lifting her eyebrows, and looking around with an astonishment not unmingled with offence.

‘Oh!’ returned Theo with insolent incredulity.

She drew a note from her breast-pocket, and, handing it to Marcella with a gesture of disdain, said,

‘Will you read this?’

Marcella read aloud: ‘Dearest wife,—Immediate business of the greatest importance, on which large sums of money depend, compels me instantly to leave town for some days. I have no time to write more. Do not expect me till you see me. Love to you and baby. Your most affectionate husband,—Charley Curteis.’

Marcella raised her eyes from the letter to Theo's angry eyes, and then, quietly refolding the paper, returned it.

‘Where—is—my husband—Mrs. Laurier?’ asked Theo catching her breath between her passionate words.

‘Theo,’ replied Marcella, pushing back her chair, and rising and resting her hand on its back, ‘we are accustomed to call each other by our christian names. If there is some cause of disagreement come between us, had we not better understand each other's views of what that something is before we commence a quarrel?’

Theo tightened her lips. ‘I admire your insouciance,’ she sneered, ‘c'est du métier n'est ce pas? Where is my husband, madam?’

And she stepped up to the other side of the chair on which Marcella's hand rested.

‘I will not be *be-madamed* into a quarrel, Theo,’ replied Marcella gently, and she con-

tinued, laying emphasis on every word, 'I do not know where your husband is.'

'*I think you do know,*' returned Theo daringly.

Their eyes met. Theo's fixed and flaming, Marcella's in a quick side glance of sudden indignation, after which they dropped, as she said in a lower tone, and hurriedly, with an air of dignified rebuke, 'I have told you the truth. I do *not* know.'

'Only I disbelieve you. Whose house is it, pray, that my husband for these many months past has been visiting *in secrecy*? Where has he been passing the time when I have been taught to believe him detained at business, or dining with his friends, or otherwise engaged? Whom is it he comes *on the sly* to see, almost every day? With whose name is his joined in the common scandal of society? Perhaps *you don't know*. I do. And I know only too well too what this letter means.'—She still held the letter in her hand—'Your husband

is going away for some days ; you received the news this afternoon ; and you have planned '—she laughed bitterly—' with a pretty promptitude to spend the time with mine. Now, madam, where is he ? '

Whilst she spoke, Marcella stepped back from the chair, and stood listening, erect, motionless, her dark-grey eyes fastened on Theo's face, her lips perceptibly parted, one hand raised with bent fingers to her cheek, and the other nervously clenched at her side. Her eyes gathered shadows as Theo went on, and more than once a nervous tremor passed over her body, as if she was about to dash forwards, and with force silence her words. Now her hand dropped from her face, and with hardly suppressed passion and emotion she managed to say,

'How can you—such words to me. Only—if you think this—well—you are justly angry—only——if you would have patience, I think I can show you—prove to you, you are mistaken.'

‘Show ! prove !’ returned Theo with cutting indignation, ‘what can you prove? Is not my husband in your house day after day, for hours together, at times when your husband is away? What can you prove?’

‘Theo!’ expostulated Marcella in a cry that was almost a shriek. Her face had changed to the pallor of ashes. She stepped to the nearest chair and let herself fall into it, breathing heavily.

Theo came nearer.

‘Tell me where Charley is,’ she insisted in a voice fraught now with a greater emotion. ‘Mrs. Laurier, tell me where is my husband. *I love him*. Do you hear me? *I love him*. *I have nothing else in the world but him*. You who have so much, how could you have the heart to come between us and to steal away his love from me? He is not to me’—her voice resumed its previous hardness—‘what your husband is to you. I was not some other man’s paramour before I married

him. I did not buy him with my wealth, to hide my disgrace——.’

Marcella started in her chair as if about to spring to her feet with an answer, but she checked herself and slowly sank back to her former pose, whilst Theo continued,

‘I have not the wealth nor the wish to wanton away my days in voluptuousness and vice, whilst my husband toils alone from morn till night. I have no lover whose indigent wife is bribed with seasonable gifts to be blind to my conduct with her husband. I have given’—her voice began to break—‘father, mother, station, friends, home, fortune, all, for my love; and there is a little child’s love between my husband and me, and I——’

She stopped short to rally her self-control, no woman to break down before a rival.

Marcella, visibly trembling from head to foot, began to answer in a low voice,

‘You have insulted me beyond measure; but you are in my house—and—I see your

anger is somewhat excusable. Did I think my husband faithless, I too should be frantic——’

‘Faugh!’ interrupted Theo savagely, ‘Where is my husband?’

‘Theo, I do not know,’ answered Marcella in the same low tone.

‘Indeed! Then listen, madam. If you do not tell me, I will go—and tell *your* husband. You know what sort of man he is, and I know how careful you have been to hide from him your behaviour. There will be a pretty scene for you when he hears of it. Now—tell me—or I go!’

‘Who has been making this terrible mischief between us, Theo?’ asked Marcella more quietly.

‘You, Mrs. Laurier. I am not to be turned by an evasive answer. I am going to speak to your husband, if you will not tell me.’

And she turned to go towards the door.

Marcella rose to arrest her.

‘Theo, you *are* deceived,’ she said suffo-

catingly, 'I cannot tell by whom. But do think what trouble this will make if you tell Mr. Laurier. For my own sake I could in every way wish you should speak to him ; but for his, no. He will be so angry.'

'I should rather think he will,' said Theo with a sardonic smile.

Marcella hung her head. The act looked guilty, but she was not conscious of it. To get a moment of abstracted thought was imperative if she was not to break out in a passion of insulted pride. Thinking, she saw that everything she objected only went to aggravate this miserable misunderstanding, and when she lifted her eyes it was to say,

'Yes. Speak to Guy. I will come with you.'

'To give him some necessary hints. No thank you. I will speak to him alone.'

'Very well.'

She stood back to let Theo pass. The latter stepped by her with a dignity and grace of superiority she could herself under such

circumstances have felt proud to possess. When she reached the door, Marcella arrested her with her name.

‘Theo!’

Theo halted.

‘Theo, I have not easily borne what I have heard from your lips this evening,’ said Marcella, slowly, ‘but I have tried to put myself into your place and to forbear. Will you—for a moment try to put yourself in my place.’—Theo made an impatient gesture, but the other disregarded it—‘If not you, but I should happen to be in the right, could you weigh the wrong, or the indignity of some of the words you have, within the last quarter of an hour, said to me—to me, your friend, Theo?’

Theo had purposely avoided looking at her, but there was that in the tone of Marcella’s appeal that she could not choose but hear it.

And for one moment, then, she faltered.

But the histories Mrs. Curteis had dribbled into her ears tallied so terribly with the facts;

and her husband's note—she had, since Mrs. Curteis left her, been to his office—was so certainly a deceit, once more to conceal the true reason of his absence, that the hard reasoning of suspicions thrust her impulse aside unheard, and she only answered,

‘Tell me, where is my husband.’

Marcella made no reply, and Theo left the room.

Marcella sat down and leaned back in her chair. Her first thought was of her husband, ‘Oh, I must go to Guy.’ The next, ‘That she should speak to him is the only thing possible. I wish I had proposed it at first.’ The third, ‘He will lose his train. Well, this time he must. I am before trains and clients, I trust.’

Then she wondered what Theo was saying. Would she be sent for : or would Guy come and speak to her ?

Fear she had none.

At last her thought came back, as of

necessity it must, on the scene she had just passed through. But of that consecutive thought was impossible. Her brain only swam to remember the hideous aspersions she had had cast on her.

Of one thing she was glad. That under the outrages beneath which her proud nature had shaken with frenzy within her, she had still kept the mastery over herself and managed not to be discourteous to the stranger under her roof.

The minutes passed, and no one came. They lengthened to half an hour, three-quarters of an hour. Weary of waiting, she rang.

‘Is your master gone?’ she asked.

‘Yes, ma’am.’

Gone! Was it possible? What could that mean? Had he not seen Theo?

‘Is Mrs. Charles Curteis still downstairs?’ she inquired.

‘No, ma’am, she is gone too.’

‘Did she see your master before he left?’

‘I don’t know, ma’am.’

‘Go and find out.’

Some time elapsed before the woman returned. She had not been able to learn much. The housemaid had from the dining-room seen Mrs. Charles Curteis cross the hall, unaccompanied, and heard her go out of the front door. She had come from the library, and—this was elicited only by a further question—seemed to be crying, for she was wiping her eyes with her handkerchief. The housemaid believed her master left almost immediately afterwards. But she had not seen him go, and was not sure.

Marcella was perplexed. But she felt a repugnance to pressing the domestics with questions.

What had happened was this.

Theo had already informed herself that Laurier was in the library, and, on leaving Marcella, directed her steps thither. Coming down the stairs she wondered a little what sort

of man he was, never having seen him, and then having arrived at the library door, knocked lightly.

A voice said, 'Come in,' and she opened the door and entered.

With his back to the fire stood Keppel reading a foreign 'Bradshaw.'

Laurier had left some minutes before. His letters finished more rapidly than he had anticipated, he had simply said, 'I am off, Mr. Keppel; please excuse me,' quickly swept the remaining things he required into his hand-bag, and went into the hall. There he put on his hat and coat, took up the small portmanteau standing ready, and opening the door for himself shut it quietly, ran down the steps, and jumped into a cab.

Keppel glanced through another page or more of the pamphlet, and then convinced that it was of less merit than he had been given to suppose, threw it aside, and rising took up instead the 'Bradshaw' Laurier had just laid

down, and amused himself with idly tracing the time of the train's arrival at the different places on its route.

Whilst he did so Theo knocked.

As she entered Keppel looked up from the page of the railway guide, and was somewhat surprised to see bearing down on him, with a firm, quick step, a tall, dark fury becomingly painted, whose dusky flashing eyes, and imperiously borne head, meant execution without mercy.

The lady came to an abrupt stop before him, about two yards off.

‘I am Mrs. Charles Curteis,’ she said, in a clear, unfaltering voice, ‘we have not met before, but you know my husband.’

‘Now, what the devil is all this?’ thought Keppel, beginning to wish himself elsewhere, and to cast about in his mind for some affair with which it was possible for this lady to be connected. As he hesitated about answering,

Theo folded her arms and looking straight in his face, said, with angry deliberation,

‘Your wife, Mr. Laurier, is my husband’s mistress.’

Keppel returned her regard. Then he pressed his lips together, and there came a little curl like as of a smile at their corners.

‘I think, Mrs. Curteis, there is some little mistake,’ he said.

‘There has been a great mistake on my part,’ returned Theo, quickly, ‘in being so blind to the real character of the relations between my husband and Mrs. Laurier. He visits this house, I find, five and six days in the week—perhaps you were not so ignorant of that as I have been—but, do you know that it is contrary to my expressed wish that he comes here? Do you know’—she went on with a heightening passion that soon dimmed her eyes with tears—‘that he has been for months past practising a deliberate deceit on me; that I have been led to suppose him detained at

business, or engaged with his friends, whilst he has been at this house ; that I have been left at home, alone, ill, anxious, weary with waiting, whilst my husband has been here—with Mrs. Laurier?’

She snatched her handkerchief from her pocket, and hastily wiped the tears from her eyes, and, choking down a great sob, looked at him to know what he would say.

Keppel’s face was impenetrable. He was thinking, ‘I have thought Charley was here a good deal.’

‘He does not seem to care much,’ thought Theo, ‘but some men have a trick of looking like stones when they are most moved.’

‘You will say this is no proof,’ she now went on tenaciously, ‘but listen. I have had a note from my husband this afternoon, in which he writes,’—she hurriedly opened the note and read it—‘and I have been to his office, and found that *no* particular business has taken my husband from town. But you

are going to Paris, and your wife—I beg your pardon, I am forgetting you are her husband. You must forgive me! I am all but mad.'

It was said with a noble grace, and a fine feeling had prompted that sudden hesitation which forbore to tell the details of a wife's vileness to her husband. Keppel was a little struck by it, but his mind was principally occupied with the—to him—distinctly amusing character of this scene,—Mrs. Charles Curteis's excitement, her extraordinary mistake, the information she was naïvely giving him, the ludicrous expectation on her part that he was going to play the *rôle* of the indignant husband (of which *rôle* he had not the remotest conception), the fact of his unexpectedly finding himself in a position to create or suppress an ugly, noisy scandal concerning the house of the man, with whose wife he would much enjoy a *liaison*. But he said nothing.

Poor Theo continued,

‘I have seen Mrs. Laurier before I came to you. I have demanded of her where my husband is, I have implored her to tell me, but both in vain. If she would have told me, I would not have come to you. I have come only as a last resource. I am sorry to have brought to your home the cruel knowledge that has come to my own, but——’

Her voice dropped and her heavy eyelids.

‘Now,’ thought Keppel, ‘we are going to have tears.’ And his face assumed the peculiar look men on such occasions put on. But Theo’s weary eyes caught the look, and she said,

‘Do not be alarmed. I am not going to make a scene—I see——’

She broke off in obedience to a sudden impulse, and half turning made a step towards the door. Then looking back she broke out with undisguised passion and scorn,

‘Confess it is nothing to you!’

She well might say so. Anything more

insouciant than Keppel's look could not have been conceived. She had expected him to be at first dumfounded and afterwards furiously angry. But a faint surprise was all he evinced, and something that wore the closest resemblance to hardly suppressed amusement.

‘Well,’ began Keppel coolly, hesitating for the next word.

She caught up the monosyllable in an accent acidulated with irony,

‘*Well*; yes I am telling you what you already knew. That is the truth, is it not? You married this woman because it was made worth your while to marry her. And what she was, you knew. I beg your pardon. I ought to have guessed it. Still—if it be nothing to you—it matters bitterly to me. Will you help me to find my husband?’

He made her a little grimace with a smile in it, and said, not unkindly,

‘Mrs. Curteis, I am very sorry for you.

But—will you take a little advice from a man of the world? These things will happen. The wisest course is to put up with them. Be discreet. Let your husband alone. He will tire of—Mrs. Laurier. These things always come to an end. If you bully him you will only repent it. See how little good you have done by forbidding his coming here. For the rest——’

He hesitated. He would have liked to speak to Laurier before he spoke of Laurier. He was far from certain that undeceiving Mrs. Charles Curteis was doing any service to Laurier. And he was conscious in addition of other interests.

But Theo having heard him so far, with her teeth locked, her lips quivering, her eyes, dimming with trouble, flashing him back their resentment for answer, finding he again paused now broke in,

‘That is enough. You will not help me ’

She turned from him and with quick steps left the room.

Keppel sat down by the fire, and reflected. 'Well, I have been a fool. That I should not have known after all these years that one woman is like another. This is exquisite. Does Laurier know it? He is always wondrous reticent about Madam. He must know. Men always do know these things. I think I gave that young lady some good advice. How those two women must have sworn at each other. I should like to have heard it. And Mrs. Laurier—ah, *ma toute belle*, I think after this you and I shall be able to understand each other.'

Theo crossed the hall alone, as the housemaid reported, wiping the tears off her eyes, and opened the door for herself. Outside, the October night was cold and raw. A fine chill, stinging rain drove on the rising wind. She had no umbrella, for when she set out the sky

was clear, and the rain beat in her face piteously.

In the street before the door was Marcella's brougham.

‘That woman rides, and I fight my way in the rain,’ thought Theo, and bitterly her soul rebelled against the injustice of things.

She went to the railway, and took a ticket to the station nearest to her lodgings.

But the desolation of that journey, in the slovenly, crowded, second-class carriage, back from the place of heartless, conscienceless luxury to her own worse than widowed beggary!

It was past nine when Theo reached home, if that was home whence *he* was gone away.

She went into her bedroom, and threw off her wet things. Then she approached the baby's cradle. Baby was fast asleep, but Theo's heart was in torture, and she took the little mortal up, and pressing him to her bosom said,

‘Oh, baby, baby, mammy’s heart is breaking.’

The little fellow opened his soft brown wondering eyes, and looked up at her face, and, seeing its sorrow, began to cry.

Then Theo forced a smile.

‘Nay, nay, baby must not cry, mammy loves him, there hush, hush.’

And she rocked him to sleep again on her knee.

Then she threw herself, as she was, on her hapless bed, and sobbed, and sobbed for hours, till she sobbed herself to sleep.

The child woke her out of a sleep from which she rose cramped and cold. It was past midnight.

A horrible thought broke upon her. ‘By this time he is with her.’

‘Oh, Charley, Charley,’ she moaned, ‘if it were not for baby, I would kill myself.’

CHAPTER XIII.

FEW things are more remarkable than the manner in which trivial things maintain their ordinary importance at the most critical junctures of life.

Marcella dined, and enjoyed herself at the Cancrolls, and was vexed at having had to hurry the end of her toilet, and to have been late.

Probably, her husband had either satisfied Theo, or, which seemed more likely, declined to listen to her. In either case she had been sent home to ponder at her leisure what kind of mistake she had committed. On her return Marcella would not be surprised to find an apology, or even Theo herself awaiting her.

In any case she felt herself secure with her husband for her protector.

But it need hardly be said that when she returned home she found neither Theo nor apology.

Nor did Theo come the next morning, nor any message, nor any letter from Laurier.

Probably, after all, Theo had just missed him. Marcella was sorry.

Mrs. Curteis and Florelle were out all day, not returning till after Marcella had dined. Then (Florelle had left the drawing-room for a few minutes) Mrs. Curteis surprised her niece by asking with extraordinary abruptness,

‘*Is Charley in the house, Marcella?*’

‘In this house?’ exclaimed Marcella putting down the cup of coffee she had in her hand so suddenly that she spilled the contents, ‘No.’

For some seconds she stared at her aunt astonished, and then proceeded to wipe up the spilled coffee.

‘Oh, he is not?’ returned Mrs. Curteis as if but half believing.

‘That is a very surprising question of yours, aunty,’ now observed Marcella with some temper.

‘Well—anyhow—I shall leave here to-morrow, Marcella. I can’t—really I am unable to speak of such subjects. But you must suppose——’ she hesitated for a second or two, and then concluded, as if by way of explanation, ‘in fact, I have seen Mrs. Charles Curteis. I don’t like her, but I will say, I feel sorry for her.’

‘You have seen her to-day?’ asked Marcella quickly. ‘Did she say anything to you about Mr. Laurier—whether she saw him yesterday?’

‘Yes,’ answered Mrs. Curteis slowly; and she continued in a tone of stern rebuke, ‘I wonder that you do not drop with shame—to be what you are, and to have your husband sanction it.’

‘What — on — earth — do — you — mean?’ asked Marcella with absolute stupefaction.

‘What affectation, niece!’

‘Well—I simply cannot understand a word you say,’ retorted Marcella sharply.

‘Go, then, and ask Theo. Perhaps you will be able to understand her, if she will see you, which I should think improbable after the manner in which your husband treated her, and what he told her.’

‘What did Mr. Laurier tell her?’

‘What should he tell her—well—really, Marcella—of course he had to tell her that you are—dissolute, and that he cannot help it.’

‘The shameless falsehood!’ exclaimed Marcella, with a rage she was with difficulty restraining within bounds of any kind.

‘Well, Marcella—of course I cannot say anything about the truth or falsehood of the assertion. I only tell you Mr. Laurier made it.’

‘And I tell you he could not. Guy tell Theo I was dissolute and he could not help it—bah!’

She rose from her seat.

‘Go and ask Theo, then.’

‘I shall.’

But she put her hands to the sides of her head in the strangest dread of unimagined misfortunes that ever came over her soul.

And holding them so, she went and hung over the chimney-piece, resting her elbows upon it.

‘I would leave him,’ she said, speaking with herself.

Mrs. Curteis looked up, smiled a hard smile, and nodded. ‘Do,’ she thought.

But Marcella again turned round.

‘It is not possible,’ she said, coming away from the fire, and moving her head imperiously, ‘Guy could not have said it. I know he could not have said it.’

‘It seems, however, niece, that he did say it.’

‘He did not, he could not,’ insisted Marcella. ‘No doubt I shall hear from him to-night or to-morrow, and then we shall have all this explained.’

As she spoke she moved towards the door. Now she stopped to add,

‘Respecting what Theo says, that is simply a shameful falsehood. Whether she is deceiving herself, or some other person has misled her, I am not in a position to judge.’

‘Well, Marcella,’ replied Mrs. Curteis, ‘in any case I cannot permit my daughter to remain in a house where scenes such as this go on. So, to-morrow morning I shall leave.’

‘As you please,’ answered Marcella, and left the room.

But no letter came. The next morning Mrs. Curteis and Flo took their departure. After they were gone Marcella drove to Charley’s lodgings.

Theo was out : gone, poor child, with how heavy a heart ! to do some of her humble shopping. Marcella awaited her return.

At last she came in. As she entered the room, Marcella was shocked by a surprise of a face jaded and wearied to a degree that gave

her the appearance of a careworn middle-aged woman. She had not taken the trouble to rouge, and the absence of the paint from a complexion long subject to the process much assisted to produce the startling effect.

When she caught sight of Marcella she paused on the threshold.

‘*You* here?’ she exclaimed.

Marcella had risen, but she took no heed of that; and having closed the door, began to take off her things, saying the while,

‘I am glad you are come. I had something to say to you. I saw your husband. I dare say you can guess the treatment I received at his hands—but——’

She had taken off her walking things, and stood now, a tall, graceful, black-draped figure, with her head a little defiantly leaned on one side,

‘—but—in the great trouble I am in, there is one woman in London more to be pitied than I—*you*. My husband has dishonoured

me, but I love him, and have hope that I may win him back to my love. You have dishonoured your husband—but he does not care. *I pity you.*'

Marcella sank back on the sofa. A small table stood beside it, and resting her arm and elbow on it, she hung her head and looked on the floor. Was it possible that, after all, what her aunt had said was true? No: that could not be.

'What did Mr. Laurier say to you, Theo?' she asked at last, and looked up for an instant, pale, but not without courage in her handsome, troubled face.

Theo regarded her with a doubt whether to answer her question or not.

'My aunt told me some things,' Marcella went on, 'but they appeared to me impossible. Mr. Laurier—did not believe what you told him?'

'He *did* believe it.'

Marcella sat motionless.

‘I will tell you,’ said Theo, beginning to understand she was humbling her rival to the dust. ‘At first I fancied he half doubted what I said, and I read him Charley’s letter, and told him how he had hidden from me his visits at your house, and how at this time I knew no special business had taken him from town. But after that, I found he knew all and cared nothing. He said very little, hardly anything ; but he smiled to himself and let me see that he regarded the whole affair with the supremest insouciance. At last I asked him if he would help me to find my husband, on which he informed me that such incidents were of daily occurrence, that I should be foolish to take any notice of it, that doubtless in a little time, if I would have patience to wait, Mr. Curteis would get tired of you, and that, for the rest, he really could have nothing to do with it.’

Awhile Marcella was silent. Then she rose with dignity.

‘It is impossible,’ she expostulated ener-

getically. ‘You have falsely suspected me, and now you are stooping to take a cruel revenge by trying to create a quarrel between my husband and myself.’

But she was quivering from head to foot.

‘Have you created no trouble between my husband and me?’ retorted Theo.

‘None, Theo—Theo—for pity’s sake, confess you are deceiving me!’

‘No, Marcella; what I have told you is the truth.’

And if any speech ever had in it the ring of truth, that had it.

Strange, shapeless thoughts passed through Marcella’s mind.

‘To whom have you spoken of this?’ she asked suddenly.

‘To no one but Mrs. Curteis. I have no friends.’

‘Poor Theo,’ thought Marcella; ‘where on earth can Charley be?’ Then making a step

towards her, in a tone very piteous to hear, she besought,

‘Oh, Theo, tell me, it is not true; say it is not true.’

‘I tell you it *is* true,’ was the retort, incisive to contemptuousness. ‘Do you think it is nothing to me, that you are come here to *whine*, as if you alone were concerned?’

Marcella bit her lip, and turned to go towards the door.

‘You will oblige me by not calling here again, Mrs. Laurier,’ said Theo callously.

Marcella bowed.

‘And, before you go, one thing. I have answered your questions. Where is my husband?’

‘Theo, I do not know,’ replied Marcella with pathos, whilst she looked not so much at Theo as towards her. ‘If I could help you—but—me!——’

She moved her head haughtily, as a woman too proud to confess suffering. What she was

about to say remained unfinished, and when Theo looked up to know the cause she found herself alone.

In her carriage, Marcella sank back on the cushions, stunned.

What to think? Theo had invented what she had said? A mind tutored to distinguish truth and falsehood refused to believe it. Her husband had done as Theo asserted? Oh, no! His character rose before her clear and definite: the strong, hard, just man, who, if she had sinned, might likely enough have crushed her beneath his becoming anger; or, in his stern love, might have pardoned her, and, for the sake of what she had been once, or that she might have where to hide her head, might have given her some, though far lower place, beside his hearth: but not a man who could have made light of his honour undone, or smiled anything resembling insouciance upon the disgrace of her misbehaviour.

Some error there must be; and to that

assurance she clung, with a desperation which was ominous.

But returned to her home, she was conscious of a sense of quiet, with an access of repose in her knowledge of her husband that dispelled much—not all—of her misgiving.

A letter arrived from Laurier, a single line, penned in haste, announcing his safe arrival, and no more. Otherwise, the next four-and-twenty hours were eventless.

Then, obedient to his wish, she went to the Farquhars' 'at-home.'

She had proposed to stay only a short time. Circumstances ruled otherwise. Keppel was there, and with the intention of seeing her. He had things to say to her which could not but be of consequence : things before which he opined Mrs. Laurier would succumb. But he purposed first to prove them, and, with a view to that, to reconnoitre.

A chair vacated by Marcella's side as she sat in one of the less conspicuous parts of the

thronged room, afforded him the opportunity he desired.

‘You are in trouble, Mrs. Laurier,’ he said, seating himself at her side.

‘Indeed, what should make you think so?’ she replied, with a smile, but struck at once with a painful curiosity to what degree her looks betrayed the shadows haunting her mind.

He kept her waiting some seconds for an answer, and then with a familiarity, which was new, but also kind, said, ‘My dear Mrs. Laurier, I don’t *think*, I *know*. *Entre nous*, you and I are old friends, are we not? I have heard.’

‘Heard? Heard of what?’

Her mind misgave her.

‘Of this unlucky affair of Curteis,’ his eyes sought her face, and she knew she changed colour. ‘I am really very sorry for you, Mrs. Laurier. I do very much fear this Mrs. Charles Curteis’s behaviour shows she intends to c

some scandal. I trust you are acting with every caution. You have not, I suppose, seen Mrs. Charles Curteis since last Monday ; but perhaps it would be as well you should do so. Of course you know what passed after she left you. Mr. Laurier has written to you? ’

They were words carefully chosen to answer many ends : to insinuate sympathy : to conceal a belief of guilt : to create a surprise at how much he knew : to discover the extent of his hearer’s acquaintance with what had happened ; and to ascertain what was her own opinion of her situation.

They failed of none of their purposes. Marcella answered him at once and unsuspectingly,

‘ I have had a letter from Mr. Laurier, but that was only a line assuring me of his safe arrival in Paris. But I know he is exceedingly busy. I—I am very much distressed, Mr. Keppel, about all this—yet I know nothing ; at least, except that I have seen Mrs. Charles

Curteis—I am glad you think that was right—and she has some story which is quite impossible. I very much wish my husband would return, but I know I can hardly expect him before Tuesday at the earliest.’

‘Mrs. Charles Curteis has some impossible story? That is not a further complication, I hope.’

‘No, not exactly,’ was the reply, embarrassed and with some dignity of reserve; ‘in fact, I disbelieve her, but’—she went on, whilst she spoke absently tracing with the point of her umbrella the pattern on the carpet—‘she tells me that she saw Mr. Laurier on Monday night, and she wishes me to credit what I never will credit, that Mr. Laurier both believed the things she was pleased to say of me, and himself spoke of me in a manner—well—in a manner no woman with self-respect could ever stoop to forgive. But, Mr. Koppel, has all this reached your ears? I had hoped——’

‘I fear,’ he interrupted her, ‘that what has been told you is what *was* said; and—but take care.’

It suited Keppel here to put an abrupt end to this conversation, and he indicated, with a look, a group near, none of whose members however had regarded them. After which he rose and walked away.

He had learned what he desired to know, and had wakened the trouble in the woman’s heart, and now he wished leisure to consider his next step.

As he pondered it a combination occurred to him not before perceived; one that, unless he was deceived in her, would render Mrs. Laurier as implacably maddened as any wife that ever took a woman’s last miserable revenge on a husband.

As for Marcella, the room swam before her eyes. Fears, questionings, doubts thickened about her, not as before, but insurmountable, whilst a heavy foreboding filled her mind with a

sense of coming peril, and of trouble surpassing expectation, amounting to nothing short of disaster.

She prolonged her stay. To speak again with Keppel was imperative.

Though it was November, the day was not only sunny, but even warm, and some of the party went into the garden to admire the chrysanthemums, and stood in groups, or strolled about, talking. Making her way back to the house, along a path over which the level branches of dark cedars of Lebanon stretched in the pale sunshine, Marcella heard Keppel's tread behind her. The next instant he was at her side.

‘What we spoke of just now,’ he at once began ; ‘ I fear, Mrs. Laurier, this is going to be a serious matter. Are you sure you are right to disbelieve what was said by Mrs. Charles Curteis ? I do not know Mrs. Charles Curteis, nor anything of her story, except the few words you have told me. But I had, from

a very different source, an account of what happened, and I think it would perhaps be well for you to hear what that was, that you might be able to judge how much of what Mrs. Curteis says is true.'

He spoke in a gentle, deferential way, as if conscious of some presumption in his offer to be of service to her.

'I am sure you are very kind, Mr. Keppel,' replied Marcella, distinctly touched by what she believed to be the kindness of a man not usually kind, shown to her out of consideration for her husband, and reminding herself she was speaking to the man on whose advice that husband placed more reliance than on any other. 'This is all most cruel for me, and with Mr. Laurier absent, I begin to be alarmed. I suspect he has underrated the importance of this unfortunate affair, and, till I can hear something from him about it—and I really hesitate to put matters so unpleasant into letters—I should be glad to know anything

you think I should know, and to be guided by it.'

He replied slowly, with an air of deliberation,

'I don't think you will find Mr. Laurier will make any allusion to what passed with Mrs. Charles Curteis——'

He paused and glanced at her to see what effect his insinuation was making. Marcella took no notice of the act. Her head was a trifle bent with carefulness, but the pure grey light in her eyes shone clear and trustfully, and her noble, fearless face wore thoughtfulness only, not alarm. She was simply listening with all her attention for what he might say, collected in her grave, proud beauty in the afternoon's pallid lights, a thing to look on of no common make.

To have her—what wickedness a little common word can hold—was worth the risk of the deceit. Not for his life would he have told a man a lie such as he was about to pass

on her—a lie unthought of when he let Theo go away deceived. But he was of the number of those for whom deceit practised on a woman is not shameful except when it is unsuccessful.

‘Respecting what occurred on Monday,’ he proceeded, in a tone of mingled advice and respect, ‘it appears that Mrs. Charles Curteis went to the library to seek Mr. Laurier immediately after she left you. She introduced herself a little abruptly. She had not, I think, ever seen Mr. Laurier. Then she at once accused you in very unguarded terms, arguing frequent clandestine visits of her husband to your house, and insisting upon the evidence of some letter she had received. Laurier appears prudently to have said hardly anything, and to have exhibited some suppressed amusement at the fuss she made. Mrs. Charles Curteis took the matter *au grand sérieux*; and, finding he made no attempt to deny the truth of what she alleged, flatly charged him with indifference.

His reply was politic in the extreme. He pointed out to her that *contretemps* of this kind would occur, and advised her not to make a disturbance about an unpleasantness that must come to an end with time. Then she seems to have appealed to him for assistance to discover where Charley Curteis is at present. That he, of course, declined; and then she went away in a pet. Perhaps you will be able to judge from this how far Mrs. Charles Curteis has been attempting to mislead you.'

Marcella made no answer. Instead a quick movement of hers led him to regard her. She had snatched her handkerchief from her pocket, and was wiping from her eyelashes—she who so seldom wept—the heavy drops of her tears.

The same story that Theo had told! And from another source. How could it not be true? Her heart contracted with a strange pain, and she wished she had not heard.

As soon as she had sufficiently recovered herself she replied in piteous, brief words,

‘Mr. Keppel, I do not think Mr. Laurier could have done this. It seems to me quite impossible. If he has—I am sure I do not know what I, as his wife, ought to say, and I cannot think what I shall do.’

As he said nothing she went on,

‘I must telegraph for him to return. Do you think I might? I know his business is very urgent.’

‘You wish for the assurance of his own lips. I—cannot see exactly why, Mrs. Laurier.’

He spoke slowly, as if essaying with difficulty to understand her.

‘I cannot but think there is some mistake.’

‘What does Mrs. Charles Curteis say? If you will pardon my asking.’

‘Don’t ask me, Mr. Keppel—only the same as you.’

‘But then—surely—the truth.’

She turned to him a look of supplication that caused him to be silent.

They had already twice traversed the length of the walk, and now returned to where, entering a shrubbery, it was more screened from observation.

‘Mrs. Laurier,’ began Keppel, in the same measured, cool, counselling way, ‘it appears to me, as a man of some experience, that you are doing scant justice to your husband. I think you are dissatisfied. Is that quite fair? Consider.’

‘I have nothing to consider, Mr. Keppel,’ answered Marcella with some hauteur. ‘If what I am told is true, Mr. Laurier’s conduct has been unpardonable.’

‘But, what would you have? Mr. Laurier makes no disturbance, he says nothing to you, he snubs Mrs. Curteis——’

Marcella stopped in her walk.

‘Do you think me guilty, Mr. Keppel?’ she asked point blank, with a cool self-possession that she had more than once shown to be a part of her fearless nature when roused. She

was a trifle pale, but in every other respect entirely herself.

Certainly his words had implied nothing less.

But he looked at her now with a kind of faith and tenderness she had not known his face could contain; and as he spoke the words struck her ears with a cadence that lured attention.

‘I?—I have sometimes thought—but—I think we will not talk of what I have thought, Mrs. Laurier. That is nothing. We have to do with what *other people* think. I—well—you and I became friends, and nothing more, long ago.’

Marcella became aware, with a sudden surprise, of a meaning in his words that their tone made unmistakable. This strange man, who had never said so, had loved her. It is probable the woman—undeceived—does not exist whom the art of his sentences as he spoke them would not have touched. Her face assumed some reserve, as she now asked,

‘ Who are these “ other people,” Mr. Keppel? Who told you about Mrs. Charles Curteis?’

A little pause, then he answered,

‘ Well—don’t ask that.’

‘ I do ask it. Tell me.’

‘ Take the advice of a man who does not wish to see you in trouble.’

‘ No; tell me.’

‘ If what passed in your library on Monday can have been known to two people only, and you had it from one——’

‘ Not you from the other?’

She drew back her head, knitting her brow. He only averted his face, and she caught his arm.

‘ Mr. Keppel!’

‘ Well,’ he said slowly, ‘ I don’t think Laurier should have done it. It was ungallant; and after all, a man’s wife is his wife. Still you know Laurier is regardless about women-kind; and, you see, say what one would, he

would tell his good story, and crack his jokes over it.'

Marcella's hand dropped from his arm. She drew herself up, and her eyes with a cold gaze turned once to the right and once to the left, scanning the shrubs, and the hard, low November lights, as she haughtily poised her head, and forbade her spirit to give ear to the agonised wail of her heart. Then she asked suddenly,

'You are telling me the truth?'

'Why should I not?'

'Why should you if no one else does? Let us turn back.'

Keppel recognised the first note of defeat, and felt satisfied. For reply Marcella was fated to hear words of strange suggestion, which, however, the familiarity she had already permitted made refusal to hear next to impossible.

'I tell you the truth, Mrs. Laurier, because I cannot but feel sorry for you, as for a woman

who I much fear is mistaking her life and her happiness. I am not a man of prejudices, and I allow myself to see life as some people do not—you know it, I imagine—and I have sometimes looked at your life, and felt—well, have you never asked yourself whether there was not something more in the possibilities of your nature than you have allowed yourself? Have you not sometimes wondered whether, with your gifts, and your sensibilities, and fearlessnesses, you were not made for something more than the conveniences the world has invented to give a semblance of value to the vapid lives of the women who have none of these things? I think you must sometimes have thought of that. I have. And I have then felt that, after all, your life was not true to what you have learned of life, was an asceticism in which, after all, you had laid down the hope of your own magnificent being, and said “no” to its great powers and to its grand passions. Is that not so? Only what

has the world given you in return for your sacrifice of your nature? Nothing. You are a woman of intelligence, Mrs. Laurier. Have you intelligence enough—for it needs much—to stand aside and look at your own case unobscured by a haze of prejudices? Conceive your own nature in your mind first—and now—conceive the scene in which you have chosen that nature should live. Have not you—you, with your nature, only think!—chosen a phantom, shadow life? If you are deceived, have you not first deceived yourself? There was another life you might have chosen, not a life of thought, conventionality, and catch-words, but a life of great passions. Understand the word in its most unrestricted sense. *La passion c'est la vie*. To dare to do, to feel, to cause to feel: passions with their unspeakable experiences, impulses, surprises, curiosities, satisfactions, astonishments—that is existence; not, Mrs. Laurier, thinking, talking, reading, dreaming of how to exist, and working up poor

reflected interests in what men and women have done, that you and I dare not do. Don't timidly let the names of things scare you. Remember they have been invented mostly by those who would have nothing to do with the things. Passion is a law of nature anterior to the existence of our race, and wider than its powers. Passively to be wrought upon, to be carried, and checked, and changed by ungovernable forces without, is the constitution of the universe ; and when we essay to abstract ourselves from its influence, we can only so far succeed as we partially cease in reality to exist. Young, spirited, vigorous of thought, fearless, and—may I say it without sinking to the odious character of a flatterer?—beautiful in a way few women are beautiful, and now outraged as you are, is it your part to hesitate to know the pleasures of existence in their true reality ?'

Marcella answered one word, ' Vice.'

' That is an ugly word,' said Keppel. ' I never dispute about words. I call existing in

reality existence. I think you will come to see it as I do when you begin to think—as I believe you can think—fearlessly. But, Mrs. Laurier, remember this——’

He paused. They had returned to the vicinity of the house, and a group of guests stood only a little way in front of them. He was not ignorant that he was transgressing bounds with her, and for the last thing he was about to drop into her ears, he wished to render it impossible for her to exhibit resentment or to make a reply. Therefore he paused a few seconds before concluding,

‘Remember that the woman who becomes a votary of realities at thirty, with reason regrets she did not make her conversion at five-and-twenty.’

Mrs. Laurier was biting her lips with vexation ; but the close proximity of others rendered not only reply but even looks of remonstrance impossible.

A minute afterwards Keppel left her ; and in a short time both had departed from the at-home.

CHAPTER XIV.

MARCELLA did not directly return home, but drove to Mrs. Curteis's hotel and inquired for Florelle. She was in, but Marcella waited long alone in Mrs. Curteis's room before she appeared.

Making her sit on the sofa, and placing herself close at her side, so that their knees touched, she affectionately took Flo's hands in her own, and said,

‘Flo, I fear I am in the greatest of trouble, and I am come to beg for your help. For some reason, dear, you and I do not seem to be so great friends as we were once, but that is quite contrary to my wish, Flo; and now, when I assure you it is more than life and death to me to know the truth of something

you can tell me, you will tell me, Flo, will you not?’

‘Yes, Marcella,’ replied Florelle, a little discouragingly.

‘Has aunty since Monday seen Mr. Keppel or written to him?’

‘No; I am sure she has not.’

Marcella heaved a hopeless sigh.

‘You are quite sure?’ she asked.

‘Positive.’

And Florelle explained that since Monday her mother had literally not been out of her sight. Even when they on Tuesday called on Theo, she had been in the room whilst they talked, though not permitted to hear what was said.

So the last hope was gone.

At the end Florelle asked, ‘I suppose, Marcella, Mr. Laurier has been saying things about you again, like he did in May?’

‘In May?’

‘Yes,’ said Flo, absently looking down at

her white hands lying in her lap ; ‘when we were in town, don’t you remember? I heard of it, and mamma too. Something about Mr. Keppel. I heard of it more than once.’

‘That Mr. Laurier had said what?’

‘Oh, you know, things about you and Mr. Keppel, like people do say. Only people, you see, thought it strange that Mr. Laurier should have made a joke of it.’

‘Naturally,’ replied Marcella.

She rose, as it seemed to Florelle, in a dream, and drew her into her arms, tenderly kissed her several times, and then without a word went out of the room.

‘You told your cousin of the things we heard in May, Flo?’ asked her mother when she rejoined her.

‘Yes, mamma.’

‘Did she say anything?’

‘No. She seemed surprised, that was all.’

‘This will be a warning to you, Flo.’

‘Yes, mamma.’

But the child’s thoughts were far from her words, far as her own nature from her life—
‘Poor cousin Marcella’s face of pain, what dreadful things it seems to say, and she was once so happy! What will she do now? And will no one help her?’

Marcella returned home, and attempted to review her situation. That was a struggle of hours, and the end was worse than the beginning. No consequences seemed to open before her except of the most desperate kinds.

It was in vain that she laboured to battle with the conviction that Laurier was guilty of the detraction of her honour and name, now on so many sides charged against him. Reluctant in the extreme as she was to credit it, the entire agreement of two independent accounts, of Theo’s and Keppel’s, formed an evidence against which a calm reason accustomed to weigh evidences refused to hold out.

Nor was it less incontestable that Keppel had learned what had passed from Laurier himself. There remained no one else who could have told him.

‘In fact,’ she was compelled to conclude, ‘I am only refusing to accept the truth because it is miserable. My husband dishonours me, in his own thought, and in public.’

Three days ensued of a description of which the strongest are able to endure but a few. Their mental history, were it set out in order, would present but one unvarying succession of restless thought overturning thought, and of emotions overbalancing opposing emotions. Of continuity nothing was apparent, save the continuous increase in the violence of the reactions and impulses to which the woman’s being, maddening beneath the sense of its wrongs, was becoming a reluctant prey.

At times, for periods at first of hours, but afterwards of a far shorter duration, an

obstinate opinion, of some deceit practised upon her, and of the impossibility of such unmanliness to the character she knew her husband to be, overbore everything else, in turn to vanish as untenable, and to be succeeded by no less assured convictions of an opposite type.

The shocks of inversions so abrupt tend more rapidly than anything else to throw the mind entirely from its balance.

In the meantime the sensible love she bore Laurier ebbed out of her proud being with an ever increasing rapidity.

The days were re-called when they first met, with his depreciation of all good in her sex ; his sneers at her thought ; his disbelief in her faiths, never overcome ; his incapacity to see how she was moved ; the manner in which he had shunned her ; the day when she had discovered he could be content to call her his betrothed whilst believing her prone to the affectations of women she despised ; his opinion

of the frailty of a woman's best moral strength ; the wide distinction of all feeling and opinion that existed between them ; to every one of which the wrong that rankled in her innocence gave now a lurid and cruel significance.

And yet she was bewildered. The heart has a life of its own, not ruled by the brain, but controlled by nerve centres within it, that give it a power to pulse on even when cut out of the body ; and a love lived deep in her heart, out of the reach of doubts, the love that had come into life there before she herself knew of its coming, which now pleadingly spoke of what trifles all these things were, nothings, mere chances, not himself as she had known him.

‘Guy to have believed me on the path to ruin, and never to have stayed me ! Guy to have believed me shameless, and never to have chidden me ! Guy just to all others, so unjust to me ! Impossible !’

But the evidence was there that it was so.

Then she would ponder of leaving him.

Hers was not a nature for moral posturing. She made no long balancing of duties, of forgivenesses. The happy idyll of the innocent, triumphant wife, and the husband a forgiven creature in his own house for the rest of his days, had no charm for her.

It was a mere question of fact.

If her life had been poisoned by a shameless wrong, she was not the woman to brook the injustice.

On Friday morning a letter came from Laurier, a long, chatty letter, of course without a word about Theo. Yet the mere sight of his handwriting did her heart good. She put the letter to her lips when she had read it.

But that too passed. Thus he had always behaved, attentively, pleasantly, whilst he all the time believed her worthless !

And now the wrong done her honour, the public wrong, began to sting with a maddening acerbity ; that certainty of calumny

tossed hither and thither, and laughed at on every side, with her name for its subject, her name, whose stainlessness was to her above price, blackened by the man who should have been ready to spend his life's blood to defend it.

Lied against, and by him !

Merited ignominy she had a pride that could stem, but before lies her temperament of truth broke into rebellion.

In another mood she would ask herself whether her own part had been rightly done. Was it because she had been content that their wedded passion should burn with a genial, even flame ;—because she had been ready to become from his bride his intelligent friend, not an insatiable mistress of his being ;—because she had been able to be happy in the many pleasures of her own life, without needing to call him from his ambitions to amuse her ;—was it for all this and for things like this that her husband disbelieved in her ?

‘ If so,’ her judgment answered, ‘ he is

very unjust. I have been but what I am. I have held back nothing I had to give. I have only freely yielded up what of all I was most fain to have, his constant presence at my side.'

On Saturday afternoon Keppel sent her a bouquet, a mass of white roses that at the time of the year must have cost something fabulous. She put them in the library, having been instead half disposed to burn them, but the flowers were too beautiful. After dinner in the evening, in one of her wildest moods, she deliberately and *wickedly* took two flowers from the bouquet to wear in her bosom.

With the white flowers on her breast she brooded and brooded the evening away. Yesterday she had been able to play and read—but not now.

But when Keppel came on Sunday morning to call, she would not see him.

The day was beautiful, and she spent a great part of the morning walking up and down the long paths of the garden with

Dushan for a companion, admiring the tender beauty of the pale November sunshine and the delicate lights it made, and, in no spirits for the brightness of the day, asking herself where she would be when the leafless stems again wore buds and leaves.

Assuredly not there.

Then she went in to her luncheon, to her drawing-room, to a long afternoon of angry, rebel thoughts before her lonely fire—too disconsolate for aught but sorrowing, and too proud for tears.

It is not all who understand the wretchedness of such grief as hers.

Had she been hungry, thirsty, aged, cold, insufficiently clothed in rags, in want, squalor, and filth, housed where the bleak wind and the rain and the damp could reach her, crouched by a hearth whose ashes were cold, in a chamber rude and naked of comfort—that had been desolation.

But young and aglow with glorious health,

just risen from her dainty luncheon, with the flavour of choice wine still on her lips, before the fire that blazed on her fashionable hearth, where the bright afternoon sunshine sparkled on the expensive fire-irons, and the tiles, and the marbles, and the over-mantel with its bric-à-brac and mirror that reflected the luxuries of the voluptuous drawing-room, dressed in the most delicious of clothes, reposed at her ease in the most comfortable of chairs, with every possession about her a young woman could covet for her own—surely it will be said her trouble had compensations.

Yes—they had left her her wealth, and her fire, and her food, and her clothes, and the warm blood in her veins to feel with ; and had taken from her only her husband, her love, her birthright of honour, the sunshine of her soul, and her due—how women cling to it!—of justice.

Only this does make it appear that some opine meat and drink and clothing and warmth

worth more than honour and hope and justice and love.

To sympathise with the wants of the poor is easier by far than to sympathise with the cares of the wealthy.

At this self-same hour it chanced that in Paris Laurier, idly walking in the Tuileries among the Parisians *endimanchés*, casually bethought him of a friend—or foe—near at hand. He left the garden and made his way down the short length of the Quai des Tuileries, into the Place du Carrousel, to the Pavillon Denon, through familiar vestibules and galleries and *salles*, and once more found himself in the presence of the Venus of Milo.

Certainly she was divinely beautiful. Something her form had of the inexhaustible, so that a man might gaze on her and ever find her eternally new. Laurier was sorry—he who could so seldom see her—that he had not come thither at once instead of loitering among the

lanky trees of the Tuileries. He knew more now than of old of what a woman's face and form and pose and expression signified, and the Venus was adorable.

Whilst he sat thus thinking, two other Englishmen entered, talking English with that impression no one understands them which the English so often allow themselves abroad.

‘ ‘Pon my soul,’ said one, a light-haired man of passable appearance, ‘you don’t say so! I remember the girl perfectly. I knew a man called Hammerbratsch who was sweet upon her. He has had a lucky escape. I met her at Folkestone some two or three years ago.—That is a beautiful thing, is it not?’—He pointed to the Venus, and they stopped just in front of Laurier regarding her.—‘She was going a rare pace then, and left the place rather mysteriously. I remember dancing with her, at a ball, the night before she left (she could waltz like a fury when she chose), and her astonishing me a little by asserting it was her

opinion a woman had a full right to do anything she found enjoyable.'

The other, a thin-faced youth with a pointed chin, whom Laurier had a distinct impression of having seen, without being able to remember where, laughed coarsely, and then said, 'Oh, yes. *I* have heard she talks like that. However, she has done for herself now. He has her, and she will have to bolt with him, if all that was not over and finished last night. Shall we go on?'

They turned to leave the *salle*.

'Will what's-his-name, the barrister, divorce her?' asked the first speaker.

'Well, they say——'

They passed out of hearing and left Laurier alone with the Venus—and his own thoughts.

'Hammerbratsch? That was not a common name. This girl who was at a ball at Folkestone some two or three years ago, and left the place mysteriously on the following day? That did not explain much. A girl who thought

a woman had a right to her pleasures, married to a barrister, who had done for herself?

‘Marcella? Why should so great an improbability have come into his mind? No; that was nonsense.’

He leaned back and again looked at the goddess.

‘Marcella had not once written to him. What nonsense!’

He rose and chose another point of view for the Venus—one where he saw her three-quarter face in the light. On her lips, too disdainful for speech, what a smile of triumph eternal over all the weaknesses of human things!

‘It *could* be Marcella. Her nature had its great perils, and they might burst on her at any time. Confusion! Could he think of nothing but two fools’ chatter about some woman?’

‘If the Venus would speak, what would she say? An amusing conjecture.’

He sat searching the face of the goddess, essaying to conjecture what words could part her lips.

‘If it were Marcella?

‘If it were? The cunning Aphrodite’s vengeance, come after all? What folly! He would shake it off by a walk.’

He rose and left the *salle*.

The early evening closed, and Marcella left the fireside to dress for dinner. As it chanced, she put on for bracelets Lady Julia’s emeralds.

In the middle of dinner a telegram arrived from Paris: ‘I shall return by to-night’s mail.’ A faint flush passed over Marcella’s face. Why was he coming home sooner? ‘There is no answer,’ she said to the servant, and put the telegram in her pocket.

After dinner, she ordered coffee to be brought her in the library; and having rung for the things to be taken away, set herself

to consider whether when Laurier came he should find her at home.

It had shown yet no ruffle externally, but in its depths her nature stirred with a relentless, implacable anger, an anger of the stifling, suffocating kind, that breeds an embittered sense of a word utterly unjust and wrong. Of that embittered sense grows a fierce spitefulness, the idiot temper of the Nihilist, powerless of good, the passion of the child that dashes to atoms its favourite toy, the madness of the woman who stultifies her past and devastates her future in an hour.

In her terrible anger, with her life, her fair life, her happy, noble life cowardly laid waste—‘for nothing, for nothing at all’—now that a crisis demanding decision had arrived, a spirit of fierce rebellion broke loose in Marcella.

The hour of her temptation was come.

What Mrs. Cassilys had never dared to name to herself, what Mrs. Curteis had laboured

for years to occasion, what Rintearn had believed sure, what Keppel had throughout foreseen as possible, what Laurier had felt after in dim presentiments, without being able actually to apprehend it, and now fearing sped on his rapid way home—the moment of that strong, just, imperious soul's unjust humiliation before its own proud eyes.

In that moment one and all had believed she would fall, and fall as men say angels fell; and strove to protect her from it, or to bring it upon her, as they wished her weal or woe.

One only, for whom this world's sun had ceased to shine, whose own life was in her veins, had thought otherwise.

‘Eleanor, Marcella's nature is full of peril for her,’ her father had said as his end drew near, ‘but I have taught her the truth, and do you let her rest on it, and she will master her peril.’

Who of these was right?

How what now came commenced Marcella knew not. Each man's temptations lie in the

essence of his being. But within a quarter of an hour, whilst, herself at the agony point of unhappiness, she rested in the corner of the ottoman, with her heart beating angrily, indefinitely there stole upon her, as of themselves, thoughts uncalled, portentous, horrible.

And as they came everything about her changed, and the great inverse of life broke into view with terrific significance. In its fantastic presence all she held of weight sank to the light importance of a myth.

She saw a struggle for life, a struggle for life and nothing more ; a wriggling and writhing, and pushing, and squeezing, and crushing, and sneaking, and snatching, elemental to life, as gravity to matter, involuntary, inevitable, un-necessitated, necessary. It wore a myriad forms, it had a thousand myriad subterfuges, it formed a myriad million combinations, but—it was all ; and all else was nothing, there was no other thing in life. Sense was its sentry, observation its watch, knowledge its

weapon, truth its vantage ground, lying its ambush, energy its drill, advance its new trick, pleasure its sense of success, generosity its cunning, hideousness its armour, beauty its lure, everything its contrivance to struggle with advantage ;—right and wrong only rules of the game the weak wished the others to observe, that they might themselves struggle on equal terms.

To live much was only to be strong, and strike hard ; and the strong and the daring left the skulkers on the skirts of life, and themselves dashed into the fray, and joined in the excitement where the *mêlée* was wildest, whirled in the storm of men, rode on the crowns of the surges, had their souls shaken with the great emotions, made themselves drunk with the maddening exhilarations, and threw themselves down in the delirious falls—till their strength to struggle failed.

To do so was daring and brave and grand, and it gave what there was to be had.

And the other kind of life was but holding

back from what the strong and spirited dashed in to taste.

It was just as Keppel had said.

What had she had for living on catch-words? and was she not young and strong, and fair, and quick to feel?

Men believed she had cast aside all conventionalities. *They* well enough knew what conventionalities were worth, those fine conventionalities printed in books! Books whose real purpose was only that of everything else men have invented, missiles for them to fling at each other's heads.

Men believed she had cast aside all conventionalities. They did her the compliment to think her eyes too clear to be hoodwinked with shadows.

Men believed she had cast aside all conventionalities.—Why should she not? Conventionalities were for the timid and weak, the poor wretches with moral indigestions whom the truth nauseated. She could show, if she chose, that *she* was not so made.

She no longer sat still, but had risen and moved restlessly about the large room. Now with flashing eyes and quivering lips, she walked its length with quick and fevered step ; now her way lagged pensively, and her head bent as if it bore woe. Here she leaned ten minutes on the back of a chair, and looked down on the floor, while her mind mapped the fields its daring could traverse. There by the mantel-piece, with her foot on the fender, she reposed her handsome head on her hand, whilst thoughts passed through it that made her sinews and limbs tremble. Here by the bookshelves, covering her face with her hand, she unread her lesson of love. The love of her husband was nowhere. The love of her mother grew dim in her clouded soul. The love of her own honour, blasphemed, hung its humbled head. Now she stood motionless in an attitude of cynic defiance in the middle of the room, with white roses in her hand, Keppel's roses, which she had been kissing to show

herself she dared the act. Now she threw herself on the hearthrug like a child, crouched over her own sorrow. Now she sat at the table with her arms folded upon it, and her forehead buried in their whiteness. Now she stood erect, defiant, undaunted, a noble soul at bay, with the brink of the pit behind it.

And the while memories rose about her and shone in a lurid light that gave them a semblance of prognostications of the end.

She remembered how Keppel had once said, 'Chance chooses and we submit.' And it seemed that it was so.

She remembered the library at Wyvenhome, and an autumn morning, and words that found an echo in fatality, of a flirt's miserable marriage made on the spur of a foolish moment.

To her memory came the character of questionable worth given her at Folkestone, and (ruinous thought) it seemed the fast world had known her better than she knew herself.

She recollected, 'Les grimaces ne sont

point nécessaires dans notre siècle,' and racked her brain in vain to remember the time or place when she had heard that.

But one word had more power to shake her than any other, that last of Keppel's, 'that the woman who becomes a votary of "realities" at thirty, with reason regrets she did not make her conversion at five-and-twenty.'

As midnight approached her power of any kind of thought seemed to be ebbing.

With one knee on the seat of a chair she leans against its back, on which her arm rests, whilst the other hand, holding a fire-screen (for she has been sitting lately by the fire), hangs at her side.

The end is very near, not that she knows it. Such phantoms of sin, such storms of suggestion, such whirlwinds of devastation have swept over her soul, that she knows nothing but her maddening, rankling wrong.

Her expression has grown terrible, terrible in its awful pain, terrible in its awful reckless-

ness, only the light of her clear eyes retains beneath a mist of hot sparse tears the last of her innocence.

And on the table behind her is a letter.

‘Dear Mr. Keppel,—

‘My conversion is effected, and I accept the realities.

‘I am coming to you ; and you shall make me what I am sure you wish me to be.

‘Shall I come to-night ?

‘Yours, as long as chance chooses,

‘MARCELLA LAURIER.’

It remains but to direct and despatch it.

But she is not thinking of that. Other thoughts have intruded themselves on her purpose, and now she is pondering,

‘Willst Du immer weiter schweifen ?

Sieh, das Gute liegt so nah.

Lerne nur das Glück ergreifen ;

Denn das Glück ist immer da.’

Her father taught her that, and her eyes have fallen on the emeralds on her wrist. And

now she lifts the other hand, and moves her arm, making the jewels throw out the beauties of their fires.

How beautiful they are ! How exceedingly beautiful. Even in this misery their beauty here !

Lady Julia's emeralds. Ah, poor Lady Julia ! How beautiful these pencils of light !

Of itself her thought went back to the evening when the jewels were given her, to how she had knelt at the knees of the stern old woman who loved her, and put off her jewels into her lap, and held out her hands and bent her head to be decked in emeralds.

Proud, happy maiden she was then.

The old noblewoman's image rose before her recollection, and she thought of the day when they first met, the darkened drawing-room at Wyvenhome, the dreadfulness of that morning, and the strange, tall woman with shaking limbs and trembling lips, come from the sight

of her dead son, mad in his foolishness. And the old woman's haughty, imperious nature came into her mind, and that lone heart's great, uncared-for power of love hidden beneath its external ice, and the desert gloom of a waning life with only tombs to love, wise, alas, too late!

And all because she would not have patience.

For this, and for nothing else, she had stayed those three-quarters of an hour beside her shattered dead: for this had stood by his pine-shadowed grave, and wept: for this had bent her pride when bending could do good no more.

And all because she would not have patience.

‘And I?’ thought Marcella.

Pensively she toyed with the jewels on her wrists. So passed nearly three-quarters of an hour.

‘Yes,’ she reflected, ‘this is nothing but

want of patience, want of strength to endure. I have been hurt beyond my courage to bear, and have become delirious. That is contemptible. I have been going, because I have lost much, to throw away what was left. That is not hedonism. My life is wrecked—what a wretch Guy has been to me—but, I can still see emeralds, and the world flows over with pleasures, and they will not cease because one man is unjust. Only, the shame of what he has done to me! No, one must never look back upon pain. I have a life to reconstruct after a shipwreck, and I will reconstruct it. But, me! what a life!’

She pushed aside the chair, and going back to the table took up her letter.

Burning blushes flamed up on her cheeks, and her heart broke into those violent palpitations of which the heavy thumping pulsation mounts into the neck like billows. To read what she had written became difficult, the words on the paper dazed her eyes.

What vile shamelessness !

And she was not mad when she wrote it !
And Guy's name that he gave her at the end !

She stood quivering with shame.

Then she snatched up the letter to tear it into fragments. But a second thought led her instead to fold it, and with tremulous fingers to enclose it in an undirected envelope, seal it, and lock it in her desk.

A shawl, left there by accident, lay on the sofa, and as she passed she took it up, and now rapidly wrapping it about her shoulders, and drawing it for a hood over her head, opened the window and stepped out on the low balcony which, a few feet from the ground, overlooked the garden.

Though more chilly than several that had preceded it the night was mild, for the time of the year extraordinarily so. The moon, but some hours past her full, approached the meridian, and Jupiter near her. On the earth lay a low, pearly-grey mist that in the light

took hues of the rarest delicacy. Nearer the leafless trees stood bleak and black against the moonlit sky, but at a short distance they grew faint and ghostlike in the mist, in which but a little farther still their forms were altogether lost.

As Marcella stood leaning against the balustrade the still silence of moonlit haze seemed to pass into her soul, and to give her something of its calm, and something too of its mist-hung loneliness.

‘How dim a life mine will be,’ she mused, ‘separated from my husband, a young wife not yet five-and-twenty. It is bitterly cruel. It would have been happier for me never to have married. Yet, I have been happy, and have loved passionately. Only the cost!’

“Als ie diu liebe leide an dem ende gerne gît.”

—She heaved a long sigh.—‘The mist is very beautiful. Things are beautiful. If Guy has any feeling at all, he might without shame spend some keen regrets on what he has done

for me. And I know he loved me once! I wonder where he is. Still crossing the north of France. Oh, husband!'

But the next morning at daybreak it was somehow reported among the servants that their mistress had gone away.

Very early, before she rose, Mrs. Curteis was surprised by the information that a messenger waited to see her.

It was one of Laurier's servants. On leaving the house Mrs. Curteis had by a timely bribe arranged to be promptly informed in case of Mrs. Laurier's disappearance, and now learned that Marcella had, late over-night, given orders respecting Laurier's return, and herself gone away with her maid before any of the other servants were up. She had left a letter for Laurier.

Mrs. Curteis hastily dressed and went to Kensington. On the library table lay a note directed to Laurier in Marcella's hand. Mrs.

Curteis turned it about and looked at it in many different ways. The envelope was not sealed. Some people break envelopes they should not, but Mrs. Curteis knew better. She asked for hot water to wash her hands, damped the envelope cautiously, and in a few minutes was in possession of its contents.

‘ Dear Guy,—

‘ Lest I should never say you farewell, I write it now before I go, whilst I can still say “fare well” to you. Good-bye, dear love.

‘ If you have doubted that I have loved you, look around you and think.

‘ Yours--till now—

‘ MARCELLA LAURIER.’

Mrs. Curteis restored the letter to its envelope and again fastened it down, and replaced it on the library table. After that she returned to her hotel.

At breakfast she said to Florelle,

‘ Your cousin has left her husband.’

Florelle looked up puzzled.

‘You know what has happened, Flo, do you not?’

‘No?’—interrogatively.

‘Mr. Laurier has discovered Marcella guilty of misconducting herself.’

‘Mamma!’ Florelle paled.

‘It is nothing new. Only now it has been found out. In the end these things always are found out. Let it be a warning to you, Flo.’

‘Yes, mamma,’ said Florelle, and again she thought, ‘Poor cousin Marcella. I knew she was in great trouble. Perhaps if someone had helped her, or spoken kindly to her, she would not have done anything wrong. Mr. Laurier is so harsh. How dreadful it all seems. Marcella so wicked and wretched, and she used to be so happy!’

Mrs. Curteis eat her breakfast with contentment. She was of the number of those who take their successes quietly.

CHAPTER XV.

IN the grey light of that morning, no less beautiful than the preceding night, before the sun was risen, Marcella, slowly pacing the arrival platform at Victoria, awaited the coming of the continental train.

The station was very empty. One or two carriages stood in the roadway (the servants that attended them beside them talking) and a hansom she herself had chartered. A handful of English and foreigners come to meet friends strolled up and down the long platform. One or two porters stood by the customs shed, and her own lady's-maid.

And then, almost before the few stragglers have realised it is coming, a train rolls in, there is a rush of porters to the carriage-steps,

the doors are open, and the travellers, looking pale and weary in the morning air, are alighting and unloading their numerous parcels. Already one of the carriages has driven off with its occupant, and now a tall, handsome man steps from the train with a light valise in his hand, and a black bag. It is Laurier.

A flush mounts Marcella's cheek. An instant's hesitation, and she walks to meet him. He has seen her, and lifts his hat with a smile. Then his hand takes hers in a firm grasp.

‘My darling!’

But her hand makes no response to his pressure.

‘I have a hansom, Guy—here,’—he crossed with her to it, and was about to name his house, when she went on, ‘Ask the cabman to drive to the Grosvenor Hotel, will you please?’

‘The Grosvenor Hotel?’

‘Yes, please. There is a reason.’

‘Nothing amiss, Marcella?’

‘You and I have to speak of something’ that will be best said before we go home.’

As the cab drove off he asked, ‘What is this, Marcella?’

‘The hotel is near. We will talk there.’

Instinctively Laurier had thought of what he had overheard in the Louvre, and was thankful he had come home. He could see now that Marcella was pale and ill at ease, and regarded her with undisguised anxiety.

But the hotel was reached. In a small private sitting-room was a bright fire and a breakfast ready. Insisting he must be hungry, Marcella gently, and almost with an air of soliciting a favour, begged he would partake of what was prepared, saying she would speak of what she had to say whilst he did so; and then, having herself poured out his coffee, sat down on the opposite side of the table.

She hesitated a moment, and then began,
‘Since you left, I fear, I do really fear,

there has come a great trouble between you and me, Guy.'

'What !' he exclaimed quickly, at the same time looking up.

'You shall hear all. You believe, do you not, Guy, that I speak the truth : or, at least, you used to think so, and I do speak the truth.'

He regarded her with surprise, but of what kind it was not easy to judge, and she went on less confidently,

'I am going to tell you all. First, though I am almost convinced you already know this, that on Monday evening, the night you left town, Theo Curteis came to my room whilst I was dressing, demanding of me where Charley was who had left her, and with whom she accused me of—misconducting myself——'

Laurier pushed his plate from him, and turning half-way round on his chair, stared at her with amazement. She had hung her head, to hide her face crimson with blushes.

‘Theo left me,’ she went on, ‘in great anger, saying she was about to speak to you. Afterwards I learned—first from my aunt, to whose story I attached little weight—afterwards from Theo herself, whose truthfulness it was beyond my power to doubt—and on Thursday, at the Farquhar’s, from Mr. Keppel (who assured me he had it from yourself) that Theo saw you; and that you’—she turned her face to him, but spoke with embarrassment—‘gave her to understand you were cognisant of my misconduct, regarded it as a matter of indifference, and advised her to consider it in the same light.’

She made a short pause, and, with all the pride of her temperament, concluded, ‘Now, Guy, if that was so, you and I part.’

He regarded her fixedly for nearly a minute, and then said, ‘Tell me more of this,’ and began asking her questions in his formal forensic way. His face was impassible, and, anxious in vain to read in it some forecast

of the truth, Marcella felt her blood beginning to run cold. In the middle of his cross-examination she rose, and stood by the fire, and then, as if becoming weary, again sat down in one of the low arm-chairs by the hearth. He followed her movement with his eyes, as though it meant something to him, but his manner remained unaltered. At length he said, ‘Thank you.’

Several minutes elapsed before he spoke again, ‘And you—believed or disbelieved this story?’

‘At first I entirely disbelieved it. But when Mr. Keppel, who (I took the trouble to ascertain it) had had no communication with either Theo or my aunt, told me an independent story, in every respect identical with Theo’s, averring he had it from yourself, I certainly did believe it. I will conceal nothing from you. When I received your telegram last night I resolved to leave your house before your return. But longer consideration persuaded

me not to act precipitately, and I determined to take no step till I had spoken face to face with you. But I believe what I have heard cannot be entirely without foundation.'

Her cold tone accorded with her words.

'And if it be as you believe?'

'I have told you, I shall leave you. We part here, and do not meet again.'

'That is just,' he replied evenly, 'and the due of your self-respect.'

After a short silence he asked, 'To whom have you spoken of this?'

'To no one except now to you.'

He rose and came near where she sat.

'And now, Marcella,' he said, 'is my word alone enough to satisfy you, or do you, before you come home with me, insist on proof? In the latter case—a course in which I think you will be fully justified—I have only to request that you will in the interim provide yourself with everything you wish, at my expense, and send to my house what commands you please:

I will take care that they shall meet with immediate execution.'

She thought some half minute, and then rising, said,

'You are my husband. I will be satisfied with your word.'

'Thank you.—This story is a falsehood.—I did not see Mrs. Charles Curteis on Monday.'

She put out her delicate hands for him to take, and said simply, 'I am glad,' and again, after a minute, looking into his eyes, 'Guy, I am so glad!'

He kissed her hands and said, 'Your conduct has been past praise, wife.'

Marcella heaved a sigh, and disengaging one of her hands drew an undirected envelope from her pocket, and gave it him, saying,

'Before you say that, read this.'

She turned quickly from him and again sat down, hanging her head.

'What is this, dear?' he asked, holding the unopened letter in his hand.

‘Last night, I am ashamed to say, I sank to writing that. Read it, Guy.’

He regarded her a few seconds, and then threw the letter unopened into the fire.

‘Oh, Guy!’ she exclaimed, rising quickly from her seat. She came to him, and laying her head on his shoulder, and her lips against his neck, put her arms about him, and said, ‘I would be proud to die for you. My noble husband. Oh, Guy, forgive me that I ever for a moment doubted of you.’

‘Mrs. Charles Curteis is waiting in the drawing-room to speak to you, sir.’

Such were the first words that greeted Laurier when Marcella and he reached home. He bade Marcella wait in the library and went upstairs. Theo stood on the hearth-rug.

‘How do you do, Mrs. Curteis?’ said Laurier, ‘I am glad to have at last the pleasure of making your acquaintance. When I have

heard what you wish to say, I hope you will allow me a few minutes' conversation on a subject which, I believe, affects us both ?'

'Excuse me,' began Theo, 'but I——'

'Do not know me. I am Mr. Laurier.'

Theo took a step backwards.

'Mr. Laurier ! But—the other Mr. Laurier—the barrister—the Mr. Laurier who married Miss Cassilys ? It was he whom——'

'I am Mr. Laurier the barrister who married Miss Cassilys.'

'But, Mr. Laurier, I saw, on Monday, another Mr. Laurier, a middle-aged man, not so tall as you——'

For the first time a suspicion flashed upon Laurier. He set it aside as impossible, but he took a photograph album from a side table, and opening it before Theo, said,

'See if you can find his portrait.'

'That is he,' replied Theo before she had turned three leaves.

Laurier said one word, 'Keppel !'

Theo stared at him. There was that in his voice which excused it.

‘This man,’ he said now with a strange bitterness, ‘has been the foremost of my friends.’ His tone changed and he continued, ‘Tell me what he said to you.’

Marcella waited alone in the library some half-hour. Then Laurier joined her.

‘It is all explained,’ he said ; ‘it is your aunt and Keppel. Keppel allowed Theo, who did not know either, to suppose he was I, and told her what you know.’

A look passed over Marcella’s face of which her husband never knew the whole significance.

‘Mrs. Curteis will tell you all,’ he said, ‘Charley has returned home. And I think, unless I am no judge of faces, his wife intends to ask your pardon with no small humility.’

‘I have no wish to see her,’ replied Marcella coldly, ‘I showed her unbounded forbearance, and she used language to me women cannot forgive, and now——’

‘You will show her that Marcella Laurier has the generosity to forgive what other women cannot,’ replied her husband.

Marcella bowed her head in obedience and left the room.

Ten minutes later the two young wives came into the library arm in arm.

‘You must congratulate Theo, Guy,’ said Marcella. ‘That scamp Ned Curteis has died abroad, and Charley is heir to Wyvenhome.’

‘Charley would have come with me here,’ said Theo, ‘but he had to go and break the news to his mother. His father dared not. I do not wonder. She is a hateful woman.’

It was quite true. Whilst Charley went with the news to his mother, Mr. Curteis went to his club.

‘Mr. Laurier begs to present his compliments to Mr. Keppel, and, whilst thanking him for his very many, great, and unmerited kindnesses, to inform him that on his return to

town this morning he found Mrs. Charles Curteis waiting to apologise for her conduct on Monday last.'

Keppel put down the note, pressed his thin lips closer together, and leaning back in his chair remained long in thought.

'Yes, I have been deceived,' he soliloquised at length, 'and I begin to think deceived in every respect. And now :—Laurier? There nothing is possible. I have lost Laurier, the best fellow of them all, for a foolish affair with a woman. I must be getting old. This is the second affair in which my luck has failed me. I liked that man. I'd have had him on the bench before I had done. And all for a woman! If he would have taken my advice and have kept out of her way! I never knew a man I liked better. I can get his interests espoused elsewhere. It will be the same to him, but—not to me.—Mrs. Laurier? I thought things were going the wrong way when she would not see me yesterday. Perhaps if I had

had more patience—but, I am getting old, that is the truth. But I suspect these odd stories about her are lies. I could stop those, by the way. I'm sure Laurier will wish it. Tut ; I shall miss that man.'

He went to his secretary and wrote to Lady Julia.

'You will hear with regret that some ugly, and most untrue scandals are being circulated against your friend Mrs. Laurier. I shall use my influence in certain houses that Mrs. Laurier may be treated in a manner instantly to discountenance such reports, and I would urge you personally to show your consideration for her by writing to say you will come and spend a fortnight in her house. Of your welcome be sure.'

'Why did not Laurier tell me he cared about the woman?' he said to himself as he folded the note : 'I'd have stopped the lying about her long ago. How was any one to suppose he cared about her conduct? There, I

have done what I can for her. I'm sure I don't grudge her him, but she certainly is a deucedly fine woman. And now for the culprit. Someone shall smart.'

He unlocked and opened a drawer in the secretary. 'I'm not going to have a good story against myself made out of this little incident,' he said, and taking some letters from the opened drawer, selected three.

A strange look occupied his face—akin to that a man might wear whilst putting to death. He thought of days when he had pressed those same letters to his lips.

He put the three letters in an envelope and took up a pen to direct it—laid it down again—hesitated—then took the pen and directed the envelope to Mr. Curteis at his club.

He had chanced to see him in the street going thither.

Then he dashed off a third letter, five lines to Mrs. Curteis, and gave all to the servant to despatch

A darkened bedroom in an hotel ; a miserable woman, in the arm-chair by the bed-side, angry for the death of her first-born, alone, for her husband has not come near her, and her children she has driven away, Charley shrugging his shoulders at the impossible, and Florelle, terrified and hysterical ; some untasted food on the table near her ; and in her heart rebellion against the unalterable harder than stone.

Someone knocks at the door, and she says in a low voice, ‘Come in,’ and Florelle, with eyes disfigured by tears, enters timidly.

‘A note for you, mamma.’

Mrs. Curteis takes it without a word.

‘Are you a little better now, mamma dear?’ asks the girl diffidently.

‘Go away, Flo,’ is the only reply, and the girl leaves, whilst her mother opens the letter.

‘Madam,—

‘I have received from Mr. Laurier a note for which I believe I am indebted to your

ingenuity. In recognition of your services I have sent three of your letters to myself to your husband.'

The letter fell from Mrs. Curteis's hand and she rose and began, drawing short hurried breaths, to go up and down the room. Soon she came back to her chair, and tearing up the note threw the pieces into the fire.

And then, already, whilst she was still stunned, the door opened, and Mr. Curteis, with his hat and overcoat on, came into the room.

'What are these, Edith?' he asked nervously, holding out three letters, which he quickly drew back to prevent her from snatching them out of his hand.

'Give them me,' she replied, 'how can I tell what they are, when I have not seen them?'

'They are letters from yourself to Mr. Keppel.'

'They are not. They are forgeries.'

Mr. Curteis made a movement of unnerved impatience and disbelief, and thrust the letters

into his pocket. He was evidently entirely at a loss for anything to say or do.

‘You will give me those letters,’ said Mrs. Curteis rising and coming to him.

‘No—I shall not—no—really—I shall not give them you,’ he answered nervously, retreating before her as she approached him.

Mrs. Curteis stopped, and said defiantly,

‘If you do not I will tell your daughter of—all that.’

But her audacity failed of success. Nothing can overreach the ingenuity of a lazy man under the apprehension he is about to be put to a new inconvenience. For a few seconds Mr. Curteis stared at her, then he suddenly turned, and made his escape from the room. Within five minutes he was driving away with Florelle in a cab.

‘Where are we going, papa?’ asked Flo.

She could see her father was angry, and was secretly in a terrible fright.

‘To the Lauriers.’

Flo thought, 'Does papa know that Marcella has run away from Mr. Laurier?' but she dared not to speak.

When they arrived Mr. Curteis asked for Mr. Laurier. They were shown into the drawing-room, and Mr. Curteis left Florelle there alone whilst he spoke with Laurier.

'I have had a very serious misunderstanding with my wife, Mr. Laurier,' he said, 'may I for a few days leave my daughter with Mrs. Laurier until I have made certain arrangements?'

'By all means, Mr. Curteis,' replied Laurier; 'Mrs. Laurier is out now, but will return very soon, and I am sure Miss Curteis's presence here will give her the greatest pleasure.'

Mr. Curteis hesitated a little, and then said,

'My girl knows nothing of this difference between Mrs. Curteis and myself, and—I feel the greatest delicacy about speaking to her on the subject—in fact—perhaps you——'

‘We will arrange all that, Mr. Curteis,’ said Laurier, easily guessing his meaning.

‘Ah, if you would speak to her—I would wait here,’ said Mr. Curteis with an air of immense relief.

Laurier went to the drawing-room. As he approached her, Florelle came forward to meet him, regarding him with a strange mixture of eagerness and fear.

‘Oh, Mr. Laurier,’ she said as soon as she had shaken hands with him, ‘I have so wanted to get an opportunity to speak with you alone. I have something to say; you will not be angry?’

‘What is it you wish to say to me?’ he asked.

Florelle put her pretty hands together on her breast, and bent her head a little on one side.

‘Oh, Mr. Laurier,’ she supplicated in broken phrases, ‘please, please—I don’t know how to say it—but don’t be hard with Mar-

cella. I know it is very, very, very wicked of her—and very dreadful—but, please, Mr. Laurier, could you forgive her a little bit ? ’

She dared to look at him, and catching a glimpse of his face, pale and with teeth tightly locked, averted her head with a look of alarm. But still she pleaded on, wringing her white hands, and with her beautiful face full of the great trouble of a child.

‘I know, of course, you are angry—but do have pity. Marcella has had no friends, only poor me, and I am so silly. I had so much to say, if I could see you, and now it is all gone. I *am* so dreadfully afraid of you.’

‘Nay, do not be afraid to say what you wish,’ he urged kindly.

‘Oh, but tell me you will forgive her. Do think how hard it is to have no friends. No one cares a bit for me, and I know. It is not all Marcella’s fault. On Thursday she was breaking her heart, and there was no one to help her. I could not. I am so foolish. I said

what mamma told me would be best to say, but I am sure mamma was mistaken. Mamma is so harsh. She would not help Marcella a bit. You don't know how hard people make the world for us. But do, do have pity on Marcella !'

Her blue eyes filled with tears.

Laurier regarded her. 'You are very much afraid of me, Miss Curteis?' he asked with a little smile.

'Oh, yes, Mr. Laurier, but——'

'But still you have found courage to ask me to forgive my wife.'

'I love Marcella.'

Laurier bit his lip, and turned away his face. He had called this girl a little fool !

'Miss Curteis,' he said, 'please rest assured that there is no single word of truth in the stories you have heard concerning Mrs. Laurier. I am sure you are glad to hear it. You shall soon see her yourself, and I shall not forget

to tell her how valuable a friend she has in Florelle Curteis.'

Flo put her hand to her lips. A compliment from Mr. Laurier!

A welcome invitation followed it, to stay a month at Kensington.

Mr. Curteis did not go back to his wife, but to his club.

Deserted by everyone, the one woman whose grief was irremediable wrestled alone in the gloom with her wrongs.

Robbed without reason of the eldest son she loved—punished for what she had not done—defiant still of the injustices of the world.

'She ought,' she reminded herself, 'to have anticipated no less than ruin, for who did ever have aught to do with the wretched Marcella Cassilys that did not dearly pay for it? Wherever the miserable young woman went, was it not patent that she drew down disaster on every soul that approached her?—on her

father, who had disgraced himself by robbing his relations to put wealth in her fell hands ;—on her unfortunate mother, compelled for causes inexplicable to leave the country ;—on that unhappy Mr. Rintearn ;—on the helpless Flo, whom her influence had rendered a perfect idiot ;—on Charley, whose infatuation for her had ended in something worse ;—on Charley's poor shiftless starving wife ;—on the misguided man whom they deluded into marrying her ;—and now on herself, Mrs. Curteis, because she would not leave Florelle in her house to be led straight into sin. The miserable woman ! She seemed to have been created only to be a maleficent influence to spread misery wherever she went. It should at least be a warning to Mrs. Curteis for the future to have nothing to do with her.'

'A letter from Lady Julia, Guy. She would like to come and stay with us for a fortnight.'

It was late in the evening of the following day. Florelle was playing; Laurier and Marcella seated, rather close together for people married more than a year, on the ottoman before the drawing-room fire.

‘I am extremely glad of this, Marcella,’ answered Laurier, taking the note to read; ‘it comes just at the right time, for I have my anxieties about some of these scandals.’

‘There is no reason for that, Guy. I am sure of it, from my reception yesterday at the Farquhars. I met Mrs. Purraid too in the park to-day—you know how rigorous a house hers is—and she spoke to me so kindly about things that I could have cried.—Listen, how that child is enjoying herself at the piano!—By the way, I have forgotten to tell you I had a note from Theo. Her parents have telegraphed to her their congratulations, and invited her and Charley to bring the baby to see them!’

‘Ah!’ returned Laurier, ‘one might have been sure of that.’

Florelle had stopped playing, and now came and stood behind them.

‘Tired of playing, Flo?’ asked Marcella.

‘Oh no, Marcella,’ answered Florelle; ‘I only came, I don’t know why, to look at the fire.’ She laid her hand on her cousin’s shoulder, and looked down first at her and then at Laurier. ‘I have been so happy here all day, cousin,’ she continued in her simple way: ‘Troubles don’t seem to come here, and you are so good and kind, and,’—she laid, a little timidly, her other hand on Laurier’s shoulder—‘you too.’

‘Do you know where you are going when you leave us, Miss Curteis?’ asked Laurier, looking up.

‘No—where?’

‘To travel with Mrs. Cassilys in America.’

‘Oh, I *shall* like that!’ exclaimed Florelle,

with all a girl's zest for adventure, 'only,—not better than being with you.'

Then she returned to the piano and recommenced to play.

'We have saved Flo, Guy,' said Marcella pensively.

'I think we have. Ah! I underrated that girl.'

'I know that. Does it ever occur to you,'—she paused, and turned the calm, clear grey light of her noble eyes on his,—'that you *overrate* her cousin?'

'What, you?'

'Me, Guy.'

It was not at once that he answered her.

'Never say that, dearest,' he said seriously; 'I cannot tell you what I think of you; I should not like to try. There are things that words profane.'

He took up her hand, and with a kind of veneration faintly touched with his lips the tips of her fingers.

And the two sat silent, whilst Florelle played on.

Had the Venus of Milo had her vengeance,
or had the man discomfited her?

THE END



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